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JULY 14, 1923

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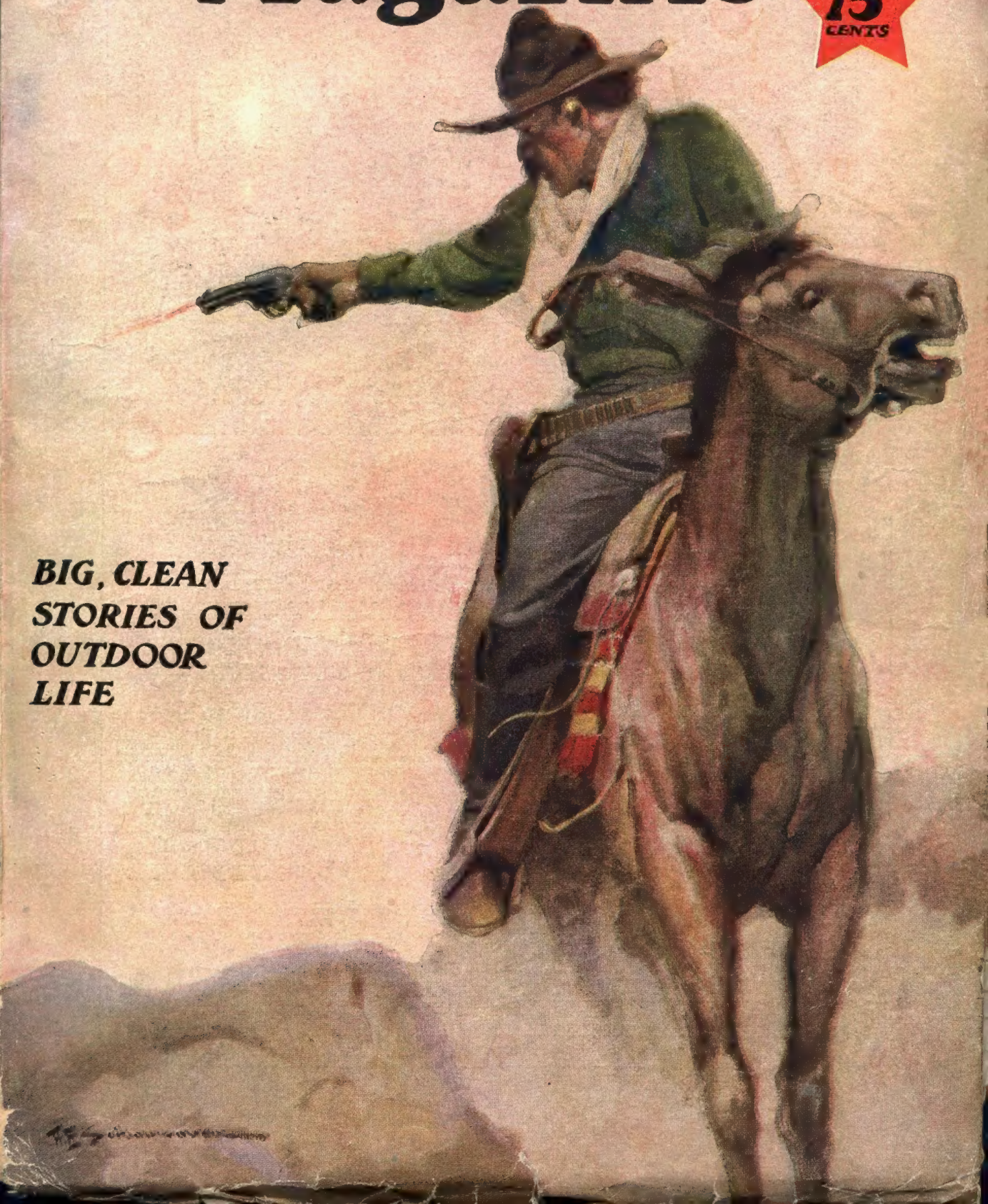

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EVERY WEEK

Vol. XXXVI JULY 14, 1923 No. 1

The Starlit Trail

BY

Joseph B. Ames

Author of "The Slab in the Cliffs," "Hidden Valley," etc.

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF THE DESERT.

ABOVE a distant, jagged line of saw-toothed mountains the westering sun hung like a ball of molten copper against the background of brilliant, steely blue. Though near to setting, the fierce, melting heat of it seemed unabated. With almost the power of noonday it beat down on the desert basin, sending up shimmering heat waves into the parched, still air, drawing dazzling reflections from the wide sweeps and combed ridges of bare sand, which glistened whitely with innumerable fine particles of gypsum.

Stirred up by the hoofs of Calhoun's mount, that same fine sand plastered the sleek, sweating coat of the blue roan, whitened the rider's boots, dusted his hair and eyebrows, lodged in every fold and crevice of his garments. It even found a way past the barrier of that tattered handkerchief knotted snugly about the muscular, bronzed throat; but, though Blaze was conscious of an occasional gritty irritation, he was too thoroughly innured to such discomfort to let it irk him.

Besides, he knew that it was almost at an end. Already the spreading desert basin was narrowing between the shale and lava walls. Calhoun's glance, sweeping past the serried ranks of grotesque cactus, the twisted stalks of soap weed and scanty clumps of other stunted desert growth, gauged accur-

ately that long, gradual slope which ended, not more than a mile away, in an abrupt, wavering line etched sharply against the sky. Beyond it and not far, he knew, lay the sluggish river and the trail to Charvas and the railroad.

It was the river which at the moment loomed largely in his thoughts. It would be low and warm and muddy without doubt, but at least it would be wet. Just now his one desire was to drink deeply and without stint and then, stripping off his dust-clogged clothes, to plunge into the stream and wallow in its cleansing, revivifying qualities.

Of what would come afterward "Blaze" Calhoun wasn't so certain. It would be agreeable, of course, to return for a while to comparative civilization and the company of his fellows, especially as he was returning with the pleasant consciousness of a rather difficult task well done. But he had never been very fond of the cramped monotony of towns. Always he had found a strong allure in the spacious, open freedom of wide spaces. It wasn't alone that the air was crisp and clean, uncontaminated by the smoke of factories, or that he preferred the silence of the lonely trails to the jostling hurly-burly of town streets. Indeed, at heart Calhoun was a sociable person, with a keen interest and liking for his fellow beings. What chiefly laid hold of him was the sense of freedom, of being his own man, dependent solely on his own efforts, the spice of peril and adventure, the lure of mystery and the unexpected. After so many weeks of this he had a notion that busy, bustling Tucson and the humdrum routine of the Carson Engineering Company would be something of a let-down.

"Still, it won't be for very long," he reflected, pushing his hat back over a mass of crisp brown hair, with glints of red in it. "Once my report's in, they're likely to start the field work any time. Besides," he went on aloud, "we're not there yet, are we, 'Blueskin?'"

The roan twitched his sensitive ears and quickened his pace a trifle. There were marks of blood and breeding in the animal which set him apart from the ordinary run of scrubby cow ponies common to the Southwest. And somehow his rider matched.

Lean-loined, long-limbed and broad of shoulder, with flowing muscles that rippled with every movement, Calhoun looked the personification of youthful strength and vigor. His face, lean and deeply tanned, was clean cut and strong, with a subtle touch of refinement in it. His eyes were brown—keen, steady, sparkling—with a lurking glint of humor in their clear depths which, even in repose, gave to his expression a touch of gay insouciance. There was about those eyes, even now, no trace of fatigue or mental weariness, and apparently very little escaped their alert and shifting scrutiny. In spite of the heat and breathlessness and stifling dust, the man was evidently genuinely interested in every trifling detail of the desert panorama.

Part way up the long, gradual slope the horse pricked his ears forward and lengthened his stride again. Across the sandy waste there was no semblance of a trail, but Calhoun's guiding touch was no longer necessary on the reins. Save for an occasional swerving to escape the prickly reach of the ungainly cholla, the roan headed straight for the ridge which stretched across the narrowing end of the sandy basin. Nor did he pause when he had gained the summit. Hoofs thudding on the farther slope, he sped on toward a curving line of green which marked with geometric accuracy the course of a stream twisting along the bottom of that barren, sun-drenched valley.

Calhoun's eyes sparkled. From the directions he was following he had not

expected to come upon the river quite so soon. It was considerably smaller than he had imagined it, and a momentary doubt harassed him as to whether it might not have been completely dried up by the long summer draft. But this was presently set at rest by the glint of water glimpsed through the overhanging branches of cottonwoods and willows. Pushing through the latter a little later, he drew rein at the edge of a dwindling trickle, moving sluggishly along the bottom of a wide, stony river bed. The instant Blaze dismounted, the roan stepped eagerly forward and thrust his nozzle into the shallow stream. Quickly Calhoun, lying full length on the rounded stones and pebbles, plunged his face forward. And, as he drank long and deeply of the tepid, none-too-clear fluid, which yet seemed to him like nectar, a brown lock of hair, clinging softly together with moisture, fell from his forehead and trailed in the water.

Half an hour later, cleansed and refreshed, Calhoun stepped out of the shallow stream and flung himself full length on the warm, sandy bank. The roan, whom he had sponged down with wads of wet bunch grass, was vigorously cropping the near-by herbage, and for a space Blaze watched him lazily, full of an immense content and a sense of well-being, marred only by the remembrance of the exceedingly scanty supply of food remaining in his saddle bags.

Presently, reaching out one arm, he fumbled in his clothes for tobacco and papers, and, having rolled and lighted a cigarette, he inhaled luxuriously. Through the gnarled trunks of the cottonwoods he watched for a space the glowing sun slide slowly below the distant mountains, flinging out long crimson shafts which turned to amethyst and gold and finally faded imperceptibly into the paling heavens.

At length with a little sigh Calhoun withdrew his glance from the purpling mountains and velvet shadows of far spaces, tossed the end of his cigarette into the stream, and stood up. Brushing away the clinging particles of sand, he straightened and stretched luxuriously, his lean, muscular, perfectly made body—the whiteness of the skin in such marked contrast to the deep bronze of hands and face and throat—standing out against the background of green like some classic statue.

Already—so swift is twilight in these southern latitudes, the heavens were darkening, and shadows were creeping up on every side. It was by the merest chance, indeed, coupled with his keen sense of observation, that Blaze observed the unexpected trickle of smoke rising above the trees about half a mile downstream. It hadn't been there five minutes ago, he was certain; and, as he watched the fine blue spiral melt gradually into the gathering dusk, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Huh!" he muttered, reaching for his shirt.

Gone instantly was that pleasing sense of languor and relaxation which had wrapped him round like a garment of enchantment. Alert and curious, Blaze dressed swiftly and made haste to fling his saddle on the roan. The horse submitted quietly, but regarded Calhoun with what seemed very like reproach in his liquid eyes.

"Sorry, old boy," Blaze murmured, giving the sleek neck a gentle slap. "I know it tastes awful good after that cactus and stuff you've had to feed on lately, but I reckon it's up to us to look into this. Maybe it's just some harmless prospector camping for the night, an' maybe it—isn't."

Mounting, he rode across the stream and, having passed the trees which lined the farther bank, came suddenly upon a rough, but clearly defined, trail. From its location, condition, and general direction he felt that it must be the

trail leading from Charvas southward toward the Mexican border of which he had been told. For a few seconds he hesitated, pondering upon the meaning of that smoke. Then abruptly his face grew keen and eager, and a sudden dancing light flashed into his eyes.

"Of course!" he muttered. "You poor galoot! It's a wonder you wouldn't use the few brains you've got, once in a while."

Turning the roan southward he rode on briskly, yet not rapidly enough to give an impression of excessive haste. The light still lingered in his eyes; a faint, enigmatic smile curved the corners of his straight lips. As his glance searched the purple shadows ahead, one hand mechanically shifted the leather holster forward a trifle and loosened the efficient automatic.

All traces of that brief, flaming sunset had long vanished. The light had died away completely, and in the velvet roof of night myriads of stars were glowing with a steadily increasing brilliancy. The darker outlines of the flanking cottonwoods helped Calhoun to follow the twisting intricacies of the curving trail until at length, through interlacing branches, he glimpsed a faint, soft, yellow light.

He knew at once that it was no camp fire, but rather a lamp set near some open window, and he pulled the roan down to a walk. As he advanced, the light grew brighter. Presently he could smell the faint tang of wood smoke, and at last an abrupt turn in the trail swept away the intervening branches, and the shadowy outlines of a long, low structure, broken by a single yellow square, loomed out of the darkness.

Blaze made no attempt to halt the horse, while he studied this building which, even in the encompassing gloom, seemed to hug the ground, to shrink back amongst the dark, clustering trees, in a curious, secret, sinister sort of way. That first swift scrutiny had revealed to him a faint shadow flickering across the lighted window—a shadow as evanescent as the blurring flight of a great moth which swooped past his face and vanished—but entirely significant. Unhesitatingly, yet with his hand stealing downward toward his thigh, he rode on for a dozen paces and then drew rein opposite the house.

"Hello, in there," he called coolly.

For an instant there was no response. Then suddenly, as if he had risen out of the very ground, a man stood close beside him. His face, blurred by the darkness and further hidden by the brim of an immense Mexican sombrero, was quite invisible, but his figure, silhouetted against the lighted window, was sufficiently grotesque and startling. Short, squat, with immense, bowed shoulders and arms that seemed to reach fully to his knees, he reminded Calhoun unpleasantly of a gorilla. Nor did his voice mitigate the unpleasing nature of the impression.

"Waal?" he snarled venemously, peering up at Blaze from under the wide hat. "Wha' for yo' roamin' 'room, lika thees for? What' yo' wan' heer?"

CHAPTER II.

THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF.

WHAT do you think I want?" Calhoun retorted coolly. "You're Lopo Garcia, aren't you?"

The Mexican hesitated an instant. "What eef?" he countered harshly, yet with a puzzled undercurrent in his voice.

"Well, you keep a road house, don't you? I want some supper and a bed, that's all."

"Eeet ees not possible," snapped the fellow instantly. "Zee house, she ees full; zee rooms engage."

"Yes?" drawled Blaze, whom nothing would have induced to sleep in this gloomy, flea-ridden house. He had made the inquiry merely to draw out

the fellow. "Well, I can bed down outdoors, I reckon, but anyhow you can give me something to eat. Don't tell me you haven't got that," he added swiftly, "because I can smell it cooking."

Calhoun saw the huge shoulders twitch and the powerful hands clench. Intuitively he guessed that for some cryptic reason this grotesque monster found his request embarrassing and was trying to think of a way out of the difficulty.

The realization puzzled Blaze. From what he had heard, it wasn't Lopo Garcia's way to turn solitary travelers from his door. Indeed, more than one unfortunate had learned too late that his unctuous hospitality was only too fatally pressing.

"Who are yo'?" the man demanded abruptly. "Where yo' come from?"

"Been prospecting in the desert," Blaze told him with a careless shrug, "an' I'm on my way to Charvas to refit. I expect," he added calculatingly, "if I get a good square meal under my belt I might make a start to-night, seeing as it ain't so very late."

With the lithe quickness of a cat, the greaser turned his huge, misshapen body. "Pedro!" he shouted peremptorily. "A light!"

From within the house came the patter of hurried footsteps, and presently to the left of the window the outlines of a deep, arched opening sprang out of the darkness. Through it a moment later appeared a second Mexican carrying a lantern. As he came closer, the light, penetrating under Garcia's hat brim, disclosed a broad, heavy, hairy face gashed by a full-lipped, sensual mouth which had a trick of lifting at one corner in a perpetual snarl. The nose was crooked, as if the bridge had once been broken, with flat, flaring nostrils. In the large, heavy-lidded eyes, which looked out from under pent-house brows there lurked an expression of veiled cruelty and low cunning.

It was a face for which Calhoun conceived an instant and positive aversion, and the thought flashed over him that perhaps he had been a bit unwise to thrust himself upon the notice of an individual whose evil reputation was so amply borne out by his appearance.

The qualm was fleeting. Was it not for this that he had come—to see with his own eyes the creature of whom he had heard so much? Calhoun noted the avaricious look Garcia bent upon the roan, and again that dancing devil leaped into his brown eyes.

"I'll let him stand," he drawled in answer to the Mexican's suggestion. Swinging out of the saddle, he threw the reins over the roan's head.

With a grunt Garcia motioned the other Mexican to light the way into the house. Blaze guessed that he intended to bring up the rear himself, but Blaze quietly maneuvered so that they walked abreast. He wasn't taking any chances with those long, gorilla arms and powerful, hairy hands which would, he felt, be equally effective at throttling a man, or wielding a keen-edged knife. Again he noted with a certain wonder the amazing, catlike lightness of the fellow's tread.

The building was of adobe and very old and crumbling. The arched entrance led into a narrow, bare hallway, the farther end lost in bulking shadows. Dark doorways pierced both walls at intervals, but only one room showed any signs of occupancy. This lay on the right, and, as Calhoun stepped across the threshold, he found himself in a long, gloomy apartment lighted only by a dingy oil lamp placed on a rough table. A small fire burned in the middle of a cavernous hearth. Two greasers lounged there, one on a bench beside the chimney, the other leaning against the splotched and leporous-looking wall.

Garcia addressed the former in rapid Spanish.

"Some stew, Juan, *muy pronto.* The pig of a gringo must be fed and sent about his business."

Though he understood perfectly, Calhoun never turned a hair. He felt Garcia's sly, sidelong glance turned toward him, and he knew that he was being tested. With a bland and amiable smile he drew up a stool to the table and sat down.

"Whatever you've got there, it smells mighty good," he commented. "I'm so darn hungry I could eat a horse and chase the driver."

"He knows no Spanish," rumbled Garcia. "Would that I could season his food with poison, the interfering dog. Be quick! At any moment they may arrive."

Swiftly filling a bowl from the big iron pot hanging over the fire, the man called Juan thrust a tin spoon into it and set it before Blaze, together with a plate of tortillas. A most appetizing odor rose from the savory mess, and Calhoun, by this time ravenous, lost not a moment in falling to. He had purposely seated himself with his back to a blank wall, and as he ate, he took stock unobtrusively of his surroundings.

The low ceiling, crossed by heavy beams, was black with the filth and smoke of ages. The walls were splotched and stained with damp; the pounded clay floor was littered with dirt and rubbish. Of the four men whose eyes followed his every movement, Calhoun sized up three of them as more or less common types of the low-class, border greaser, ready to fawn or stab for pay, as circumstances demanded. Garcia, however, presented a much more sinister menace—the menace of immense bodily strength, brutish cruelty which would balk at nothing, and a certain low cunning. With that ugly, misshapen, yet strangely dominating, figure before him, Calhoun could well believe the tales which had spread into the far reaches of the desert. If only half of them were true, this lonely, isolated road house—the House of the Wolf, as it was sometimes called—must have been the scene of enough horrors to chill the stoutest heart. And yet not one of the lone travelers who had mysteriously dropped out of sight forever, not one had been actually seen to enter that dark, arched portal. Suspicions there might be in plenty, but of real proof that they had met their end at the hands of Lopo Garcia, there was none.

Calhoun's imagination was fairly vivid, and for all his reckless courage he presently found himself hankering for the velvet darkness of the night, the fresh, free air fanning his face, the feel of the roan's muscles beneath his thighs. Indeed, the last few mouthfuls of the stew were just a trifle difficult to swallow, and when he had emptied the bowl he stood up promptly.

"Great stuff," he drawled. "How much are you going to nick me?"

"Two dollar," stated Garcia succinctly.

"Wough! I sure must look like ready money." Blaze plunged one hand into his pocket and drew out a silver dollar and some small change. He laid the former on the table. "That's a great plenty," he said coolly; "a whole heap, if you ask me."

Garcia thrust forth his chin and glared at Calhoun? "I say two dollar!" he growled.

Blaze returned his scowling glance steadily. "I heard you," he rejoined quietly, jingling the quarter and two dimes left in his hand. "If you think I'm going to land in Charvas with not even the price of a smoke, you've got me wrong, friend."

The Mexican did not answer. Standing there with head thrust forward from his immense, bowed shoulders and powerful fingers curved like talons,

his narrowed, raging eyes met and clashed with Calhoun's clear, steady brown ones, in which an eager, reckless light danced and flickered. The silence, no greater than before, had suddenly become surcharged with tension and suspense. The other three greasers did not stir. Blaze guessed that they were merely awaiting a signal from their chief to start something, yet not a muscle of his face quivered. Cool, composed, a faint smile on his lips, his sparkling eyes held Garcia's steadily. Slowly, interminably the minutes passed. Suddenly the Mexican's shoulders twitched, his lids flickered, and for an instant he averted his baleful glance.

"I thought you'd be reasonable," said Blaze carelessly. "Reckon I'll pull my freight."

Still watching Garcia, he moved deliberately toward the door. On the threshold he paused momentarily, his eyes raking the faces of the four men standing so quietly in the shadows of the squalid room. He had no intention of letting Garcia know how much money he had on his person.

"Good night," he said lightly, a faint, sardonic undercurrent in his voice.

With catlike swiftness he slid away from the opening, darted through the arched doorway and out into the shadows of the night. Reaching the roan, he vaulted into the saddle, turned the horse swiftly northward, and touched him gently with one heel. As the thoroughbred settled into his long, reaching stride, Calhoun gave a gentle sigh of relaxation.

"Agreeable cuss," he murmured, feeling for tobacco sack and papers. "Well named, too—Lopo! My showing up seemed to have annoyed him a lot. I wonder who he was expecting."

Drawing a match across the leathern saddle skirt, he lit his cigarette and rode on, pondering. Perhaps some bigger game was on its way into this mantrap. That would account for Garcia's unwillingness to spring it prematurely. Blaze wondered who it could be. At least it would be well if he met any one traveling south from Charvas to give them a word of warning.

With this thought in mind he rode on, slowing up the roan somewhat, now that the danger of pursuit was over. When presently the distant sound of hoofs was borne to him on the gentle night breeze, he was not surprised. Halting his horse beside a spreading cottonwood, he awaited the appearance of the unknown, grimly pleased at the chance of thwarting such a devil as Lopo Garcia.

Before many moments had passed Calhoun realized that more than one horseman was approaching. Though he could not be quite sure, the jumble of hoofbeats seemed to indicate three at least, if not four. For the first time the thought occurred to him that the party might consist of Garcia's friends rather than potential victims.

The possibility made him rein the roan in under the drooping branches, from which shelter he could see well enough without being exposed to observation. The hoofbeats came on steadily, and at length several shadowy figures appeared around a bend in the starlit trail. There were four of them, riding two abreast, and Blaze was debating whether or not to ride out and halt them, when the silence was abruptly broken by a swift sibilent remark in Spanish.

"It is possible that Garcia may have given us up and closed the house."

The voice was smooth and refined; the speaker's accent singularly perfect.

"Have no fear, señor," came the reply, in the coarse, slurring patois common among most low-class Mexicans. "Lopo knows that we arrive tonight. He will be awaiting us."

"Let us trust so. It would be annoying on the heels of that accursed delay

to find the door closed in our faces. Besides——"

As the speaker paused, the group was almost opposite the spreading shadow, where Calhoun sat his roan, motionless. Though he could make out nothing but the blurred outlines of the four mounted figures, that first voice stamped the unknown as a person of birth and breeding. Not a little puzzled, Blaze wondered what possible connection there could be between a Mexican of the upper classes and that sinister creature he had so lately left. And then quite suddenly he heard the scratching of a match, and a little yellow flame sprang up in the darkness.

Scarcely a second passed before it was cupped between two slender, aristocratic hands and raised to the end of a cigarette dangling from a pair of petulant lips, the upper adorned by a small, carefully tended black mustache. But in that instant it illumined clearly the face of the person riding at the caballero's elbow. A lovely face it was, fresh, dewy, young, in spite of faint shadowy circles of weariness under the long-lashed eyes—the face of a girl of twenty, the delicate, fair skin tinged with a soft pink, the smooth, low forehead shadowed by wavy masses of pale-blonde hair.

Dazed, incredulous, Blaze Calhoun stared at the vision, scarcely able to credit the evidence of his senses. And then abruptly the light went out.

CHAPTER III.

EAVESDROPPING.

TORN by conflicting emotions, Calhoun's puzzled, troubled gaze followed the progress of the little party until their vague outlines melted into the shadows. His first impulse had been to ride out and stop them. They were evidently heading straight for that sinister road house, and the mere thought of this girl in the power of Garcia was intolerable. But, before he had time to act, the remembrance of those few overheard words stilled the twitching of his fingers on the bridle reins.

Apparently there was some acquaintance between the Mexican and Lopo Garcia. The possibility did occur briefly to Blaze that the peon might be acting as a decoy to lure the others into that trap, but somehow this didn't seem to fit exactly. Lastly, though there were signs of physical weariness in the girl's face, he had noted no evidence of anxiety or terror. Evidently she was here and in this company of her own free will. For all he knew, she might be married to the Mexican with the slim, aristocratic hands. Such things had happened before, though Blaze found the possibility curiously unpleasing. In any case she was not likely to welcome the interferences of a total stranger appearing unheralded out of the darkness. And there were her three companions to consider.

So Calhoun let them pass, but when they had disappeared he continued to stare along the empty, starlit trail, his brown eyes troubled and perplexed. He could make nothing out of the strange encounter, but it was impossible to keep the memory of that fresh young face out of his thoughts. He pictured the girl dismounting before the gloomy adobe house, which shrank back among the trees, as if striving to hide its horrid secrets. In imagination he saw her falter at the dark, arched opening, enter that foul and filthy room, pictured her shock, as she came face to face with Lopo Garcia. Somehow it didn't bear thinking of, and with a sudden grunt he stirred the roan with his heel, left the shelter of the cottonwood, and turned southward.

"Likely I'm a meddling fool," he muttered. "But I reckon I'll just snoop around a little and—and make sure. After all no one will know."

The roan, stepping delicately along the dusty trail, made very little noise. Calhoun rode cautiously until he was within a hundred yards or so of the road house and then, turning in among the trees, dismounted and fastened the horse securely. Proceeding on foot he came presently within sight of the building, only to find it the center of quite a little bustle and animation. The arched opening was dimly illumined from within, and in two windows to the left of it lights twinkled. The horses stood in a group before the door, and, as Blaze watched them, two peons, one carrying a lighted lantern, led them out of sight around the further corner of the building.

Nothing was to be seen of the girl and her companions. They had gone inside of course; and presently Calhoun left the shelter of the trees and circled noiselessly to a point from which he could look into the room where he had eaten supper.

The window was deeply recessed in the thick adobe wall and covered with a heavy iron grille. From where he stood back in the darkness, Blaze could see only a narrow strip down the middle of the long, shadowy room. The table, on which stood the lamp, was in the foreground, and beyond it a faint flicker marked the position of the cavernous fireplace.

Neither Garcia nor the strange Mexican were in sight, but seated at the table, her profile toward the window, was a slender figure which Blaze recognized instantly with an odd, unexpected little thrill. Her shoulders drooped perceptibly, her chin rested on one upraised hand; she seemed to be staring abstractedly at the rough table top.

Illumined by the lamplight, her youthful loveliness was even more noticeable than before. In spite of a certain delicate firmness of mouth and chin, there was an appealing quality about it which sent the color tingling suddenly into Calhoun's bronzed face and clenched his hands spasmodically. Even if she were in no physical danger —and of that he was by no means sure —her mere presence in this squalid, horrible place seemed an outrage. Calhoun itched to lay violent hands on the dandified Mexican who had brought her here, and then of a sudden he came to himself with the embarrassed, shame-faced expression of one who had allowed emotion to predominate over common sense.

"All the same," he told himself stubbornly, "the whole business looks mighty queer to me. I'll bet a dollar there's something fishy about——"

At that instant he saw the girl straighten abruptly and lift her head. Though her face was turned away from him, her whole pose and attitude was eloquent of one who has experienced some sudden shock. Still staring frozenly at something beyond Calhoun's line of vision, her lifted hand dropped to the table and seemed to reach out blindly across the rough boards. To Calhoun's intense surprise it was covered instantly by another hand, large, black, competent-looking, and a stout negro woman, tall, broad and big-framed, moved suddenly into the picture and stood beside the girl.

It was an eloquent tableau, and Blaze was not surprised when Garcia stepped into it, accompanied by a slim, slight, black-haired man of thirty-five or so, with clean-cut, rather arrogant, features and a small black mustache which stood out prominently against the sallow pallor of his skin. Bending forward eagerly, Blaze heard the subdued rumble of Garcia's harsh voice, the low, well-modulated murmur of the Mexican's reply; but he was unable to make out a single word. The girl sat silent, frozen, staring intently—with what stricken horror Calhoun easily divined —at the hideous face of Lopo Garcia. On the table the black fingers pressed

the white ones with a firmer, reassuring touch.

At this moment the sound of voices and a flickering gleam of light dancing among the trees at the far end of the house, drove Blaze hurriedly back into deeper shadows. For the next half hour or more he was forced reluctantly to keep at this safe distance. The peons did not enter the house, but lounged around the doorway, smoking and conversing together in subdued tones. Calhoun scarcely dared to stir, and from where he stood he could see almost nothing that went on in the lighted room. Now and then a shadow passed before the lamp, or he caught a vague sense of movement beyond the table. Presently the faint occasional clink of crockery decided him that they were having supper.

It was all very tantalizing, and when at length the peons, summoned by a harsh voice from within, entered the house and closed the ponderous door, Blaze did not even await the rattle of heavy bolts and chains to make swiftly for his former point of vantage. To his disappointment the girl was gone and also the stout negro woman. For a moment, he thought the room was empty, and he stole forward a step or two to make sure. Suddenly Garcia's unpleasant voice, pitched in a low, but penetrating, whisper, halted him in his tracks.

"She suspects nothing, eh? She trusts you—yes?"

"Implicity. Why should she not after all these years? Remember, she knows some Spanish. Caution your peons, Lopo, to be careful while she is about."

It was the slim, aristocratic Mexican who spoke. By this time Blaze had discovered that the two were standing just to the left of the window. Garcia gave an acquiescent grunt.

"You think he will consent now?" he asked interestedly, after a pause.

"Of a certainty. He adores her. When he finds that she is there with him at Las Hermanas, his stubborn tongue will be swiftly loosened."

"H'm! And—afterward?"

The Mexican hesitated briefly. When he answered there was an undercurrent of hesitation, of evasion in his soft, well-modulated voice.

"What matter, Lopo?" he returned impatiently. "Rest tranquil. I shall find a way. Show me where I am to sleep. I grow weary, and we make an early start."

There was a slight stir within the room, and Calhoun slid swiftly to one side of the window and stood motionless against the wall. Presently the lamp went out, leaving only the faint glimmer of a candle. This flickered for a moment or two on the meshes of the grille, cast a sudden, bulking shadow of Garcia's head and shoulders—grotesque, distorted, horribly inhuman—across the broad, deep recess of the window, before it, too, faded away. Presently there was the sound of receeding footsteps; and profound silence.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GRATED WINDOW.

PUZZLED, thoughtful, Blaze raked the gloomy, darkened front of the house with questioning eyes. He was still completely in the dark regarding the meaning of that cryptic conversation, but out of the tangled labyrinth of words one fact loomed clear and definite. The girl had been brought here by lies and treachery—betrayed by this sleek, suave, smooth-tongued creature whom she so evidently trusted. Of the nature of the plot of which she seemed the center, Calhoun had not the slightest notion. If only those two had been a little clearer!

Suddenly the thought occurred to him that there might be further and more illuminating conversation in the

bedroom. Stepping swiftly to the nearest corner, his glance swept the side of the building only to find it plunged in impenetrable gloom. Without wasting an instant he turned back and, hurriedly skirting the darkened front, struck into a path leading toward the farther corner—that same path along which the peons had led away the horses. As he turned that corner, the sight of a dimly lighted square, breaking that smooth, dark expanse of wall, brought a sparkle into his eyes.

The path curved away from the house a little, leading downward over a gentle slope. Leaving it, Blaze felt his way cautiously along the wall to pause at length close to one side of the lighted opening. Like the others, this window was barred by the meshes of a heavy grille, and for a moment or two no sound came from within the room. Then all at once the stillness was broken by a soft, low, troubled voice, so clear and distinct that the words might have been spoken in Calhoun's very ear.

"This—this place frightens me a little, Mandy. These bars—the door without a lock—that horrible man! What does it all mean? Why do you suppose Señor Cordova brought us here?"

"Dere now, honey, doan yo' go frettin' yo'self like dat," soothed a full-throated, hearty voice. "Dis hyer shore am a turrible spooky house, an' dat hairy man wif long arms ain't fit for de likes of yo' to 'sociate wif. But Ah specs dere wasn't no udder house in dish hyer wild kentry to spend de night in. Yo' ain't mistrustin' Mistah Cordova, am yo', Mis' Cynthy?"

The girl hesitated for an instant. "No, oh, no—of course not!" she returned hastily. But somehow it seemed not so much the haste of conviction as the tone of one who glimpses an abyss opening suddenly underfoot and deliberately turns her glance aside. "I can't—I mustn't. Why, without his keeping faith we should all—— Hugh——" She caught her breath swiftly. "It just seems a little odd that he should know this—this creature."

"Lak enough he's been hyer before on his way t'ro'," suggested the negress hopefully. "Dese hyer greasers all 'pear to me lak poor, mis'able trash, but Ah specs they's 'spectable enuff in their no-'count way. Wait till mawnin' come, honey, an' Ah thinks it will look mighty different."

The girl made no answer, but suddenly her shadow fell across the broad window sill, and Blaze, glancing sidewise, saw a small, shapely hand close over one of the iron bars and grip it tight. The sight of that hand and the knowledge that the girl was standing almost beside him, roused in him a curious mingling of tenderness and pity and overwhelming self-reproach. He had no compunctions in spying on Lopo Garcia and that other whom he was swiftly coming to suspect was almost as great a villain. But to listen to the troubled, unconscious outpourings of this helpless girl seemed somehow a shameful thing, and the color crept into his face and lingered there. He wanted desperately to steal away, but, as long as she stood there by the window, she could hear his slightest move and would probably be terrified. If only she would step back into the room and set him free!

She did not. Instead she spoke suddenly again, in a low, rapid, not altogether steady, voice. She did not address the negress, Mandy, or any one. To the embarrassed involuntary eavesdropper it seemed rather as if she were striving to reassure herself by giving combat to a multitude of doubts which had risen in her brain.

"It's all right, of course—it must be. We had to be secret because of Hugh. If any of them found out—his peril——" She caught her breath, and her fingers tightened on the iron bar.

"But still, some one might have been safely told. Rita—Mr. Marsters—what will they think when they find me gone? It seemed all right then, but now—now, without a soul to tell me what I ought to do——"

"What yo' sayin', honey?" broke in the negress.

Blaze heard a little, determined gulp which cut him to the heart.

"Nothing, Mandy," returned the girl, a betraying note of hopelessness and growing despair quivering through her brave attempt at lightness. "I'm just grumbling a little to myself, that's all."

The poignant undercurrent in her low voice stung Calhoun into sudden, impulsive action. Without pausing to weigh and consider consequences, he bent forward abruptly and spoke:

"Please don't cry out," he said in a low, quick voice. "And you mustn't be afraid. I saw you come here. I know this place for what it is, and I wanted to warn you."

The girl caught her breath and sprang back from the iron grille. Blaze saw her face turn pale, and her eyes diliate, as she stared at him through the heavy bars, but not a sound came from her parted lips.

"This man Cordova isn't to be trusted," Calhoun went on rapidly. "I heard him——"

"Who's dat?" demanded the negress sharply, moving swiftly toward the window. "What——"

"Hush, Mandy," broke in the girl, her voice a little strained and husky. Her gray eyes searched Calhoun's face, and little by little the tense lines faded from her own. "Who—are you?"

Blaze told her briefly. "I got in from the desert only a few hours ago," he went on hurriedly. "This man Garcia is notorious—his house an infamous trap. On the trail I met you, coming here; I was standing in the shadow of the trees. I should have warned you then, but something Cordova said made me believe that he and Garcia were friends. Somehow, though, I couldn't be quite sure, and you—you were a woman, and so I turned back and followed. You aren't in any danger from Garcia, but Cordova——"

He hesitated an instant and the girl bent forward a little. The negress stood close beside her mistress, listening intently, the whites of her eyes gleaming oddly in the candlelight.

"Yes?" questioned the girl in a low, breathless voice. "What of Cordova?"

"I heard them talking together. I don't know where he's taking you, or for what, but Cordova is certainly deceiving you in some way; I heard him say as much to Garcia. There's something crooked he's planning to put across." Blaze stepped closer to the window. "I know this sounds——"

With horrible abruptness the ground gave way completely under his feet. One hand clutched unavailingly at the window-ledge. The lighted square flashed up and vanished, as Blaze plunged down into pitchy darkness. The smothered cry of horror from the girl, which for a fraction of a second rang in his ears, was the last sound stamped upon his consciousness.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAP.

WITH a low groan, Calhoun turned his body sidewise and slowly opened his eyes. His head ached and throbbed, and for a space he lay motionless staring into the inky blackness that pressed down on him. What had happened? Where was he? The air was cold and damp, with a curious acrid odor. His exploring fingers touched a smooth, level surface of hard-packed earth.

Then suddenly it all flashed back on him—the lighted window, the girl, that unexpected giving way of what seemed so solid under foot, the gasping plunge

into a black void—the crash. He moved his head a little, and his cheek grazed the rough surface of a squared block of stone. That must have been what he had brought up against. Struggling to a sitting posture, acutely conscious of a bruised side and somewhat painful ankle, Blaze fumbled in his pocket for a match and drew it swiftly across the stone.

The tiny, flickering flame revealed vague outlines of a bare, rectangular room of considerable size. The walls were of dressed stone, overlaid by a thick coating of adobe, which here and there had cracked and flaked off in large, irregular patches. Save for the narrow recess in which Calhoun lay, those walls were apparently unbroken.

Getting stiffly on his feet, Blaze lifted the wavering match flame above his head and stared upward. About twelve feet above the hard-packed earthen floor, dark, massive beams spanned the ceiling at regular intervals, the spaces between them filled solidly with wide, stout-looking planks. The recess, on which Calhoun's interest centered, was some five feet deep and twice as long, and apparently it projected into the earth beyond the adobe walls of the house above. Gazing eagerly upward, Blaze could just discern the outlines of a dark opening about three feet square, through which a faint breath of fresh, cool air was wafted down on him.

Then his match went out. Now, as he felt for another, stepping forward a little the better to study that hole, his boot struck against some metal that clinked. Investigation proved this to be a massive iron bolt, much pitted with rust, to which was still fixed quaint, ancient-looking fittings, the latter containing fragments of heavy, hand-wrought nails. Strewn over the floor was a quantity of fresh earth. With these clews to guide him Calhoun was not long in solving the mystery of the mishap which had overtaken him.

The opening above had been closed by a heavy trapdoor of wood—later he discovered the remnants of it hanging flat against the outer side of the recess—concealed from outer view by a layer of earth. What purpose it had once served Blaze had no idea. Clearly it had been out of use long enough for the nails to rust and weaken and the wood to rot, so that his weight pressing from above was enough to tear the fastenings loose and plunge him into this trap.

That it was likely to be a trap, indeed—though not, perhaps, a deliberate one—Calhoun soon discovered. The walls were smooth and unscaleable. Even by placing one foot in the cavity from which that loose stone had fallen, the tips of his reaching fingers lacked a good four feet of touching the rim of the opening. He could not even catch hold of the lower edge of the trapdoor; and he felt that, even if he did, it would be only to drag the rotten boards down on his head. The comparative narrowness of the cellar room made a successful jump impossible.

Balked in this direction, Calhoun set about at once examining the remainder of the underground chamber. In this he was hampered somewhat by the dwindling of his stock of matches, but he saw enough to give him food for thought. The masonry was very solidly built and showed signs of unusual age. Indeed, Blaze swiftly reached the conclusion that these foundation walls were much older than the adobe structure they supported, and he wondered whether they might possibly have been a part of one of those ancient Spanish churches which were scattered through the Southwest before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock.

Much more interesting and intriguing was the realization that the place had lately been used to stable horses. A number of iron rings hung from the walls at intervals, and everywhere the

earthen floor had preserved the prints of hoofs, many of them comparatively fresh. Was this, by chance, a secret hiding place where Garcia kept his stolen horses—the mounts of those unfortunate travelers of whom no trace had ever come to light? The thought brought a grim smile to Calhoun's lips and set him searching eagerly for the door.

He found it easily enough—a massive oaken portal set in the wall opposite the recess. It was equipped with the same sort of heavy bolt which had been the cause of his undoing, and that bolt had not been thrust into its socket. But when Blaze cautiously lifted the metal latch and shoved against it with all his strength, the door remained immoveable.

"Bolted on the other side," he commented aloud. "Wouldn't you know it?"

The match burned out, and he felt in his pocket for another. He found none and, searching swiftly through his other pockets, came presently to the unpleasant realization that he had used them all.

"And that's that," he muttered. "I'll have to go it blind, I reckon."

He had already gone over the better part of two walls. Starting at the left of the door, he felt his way slowly along, his fingers sweeping lightly over as much of the surface as he could reach. Rough stone and smoother adobe were all they touched, and he finally regained the recess with the conclusion that the cellar contained but one practical exit. There might possibly be, he supposed, some opening beyond the reach of his exploring fingers, but this he doubted.

Leaning there against the wall, he happened to glance upward to discover that the outlines of the open trap were now faintly visible—a somber gray square set in a frame of still impenetrable blackness. Evidently dawn was slowly breaking. It wasn't altogether a pleasant realization. Daylight would mean the stirring of the household, and the sight of that betraying, open hole would bring discovery. On the other hand, without light Blaze knew it would be impossible for him to make a complete and thorough examination of his prison. And so he made himself comfortable on the floor.

The time did not drag, for there was much to think over and consider. What were the odds against him? Garcia and the three peons at least; perhaps in addition the suave, treacherous Cordova and his servant. It all depended on how soon the broken trapdoor was discovered. Calhoun had already made sure that his automatic had not been injured by the fall, and now, balancing the weapon meditatively in one hand, he mentally sketched out their probable method of approach.

He could hold the door forever, and, by standing in the corner to his right, he would be well out of range of the open trap. But suppose they didn't openly attack at all? Suppose they merely blocked off the opening through which he had fallen and settled down to wait?

Calhoun's face hardened, and a momentary grim smile twitched the corners of his mouth. Then swiftly his eyes sparkled with that dancing light, and his broad shoulders squared. After all, life would be a mere humdrum round but for such interludes as this. There would be a way; at least there always had been one. Indeed, his own predicament troubled him less than the thought of the roan tethered out there in that scanty thicket, or the girl, prisoned in the room above, a prey to endless doubts and fears and dread uncertainties.

The gray light was stealing over the edges of the trap and illumining the upper portion of the recess. It should strengthen swiftly now. In half an

hour he ought to be able to see his way around this subterranean place.

Again his thoughts flashed to the girl, as they had done so many times before. What must her feelings have been to see him plunge out of sight before her eyes, leaving his warning only half complete? What was she thinking about now?

Why couldn't that cursed bolt have held up a scant two minutes longer? He had merely confirmed her suspicions of Cordova, roused in her mind doubts and terrors of an unknown danger, without a chance to tell her all, or to proffer her the aid he fully intended. Helpless to take any effective stand against Cordova and the others; perhaps unwilling even, because of the apparently vital nature of her mysterious errand, to risk turning the Mexican openly against her, she would yet be tortured by constant fears, made doubly harassing because of her ignorance of the character of the threatened peril. Blaze stirred uneasily and exclaimed under his breath. And then abruptly he sprang up and, crouching against the wall, stared tensely upward at the open trap.

Voices! Voices and the scuffling hoofbeats of walking horses. The peons were bringing the mounts of Cordova's party around from those unseen stables in the rear. The path would take them within twenty feet or less of the open trap.

Drawing his automatic, Blaze drew softly back a pace or two, his narrowed, questioning gaze fixed intently on the lighted square above his head.

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNDERGROUND PASSAGE.

PRESENTLY, relaxing, Calhoun dropped his weapon back into the holster. Without a pause the sounds had passed on and died away. Evidently from the somewhat lower level of the path the gaping hole underneath that barred window had remained unnoticed.

Nevertheless the thoughtful lines in Calhoun's face did not entirely smooth away. They were on the point of starting, then? The household must have been stirring at break of dawn, or even earlier, yet not a single muffled footfall had penetrated into this underground place. Blaze was frankly puzzled until all at once he recalled those floors of hard-packed earth he had noticed in the long kitchen and the gloomy hall.

"Clever, by Judas!" he muttered. "Not only looks as if the house was built on solid ground like most of 'em, but makes this place sound-proof. A dozen horses stamping at once wouldn't raise a——"

He broke off abruptly and stared down into the recess, where a little spot of white had just caught his eye. Stepping quickly forward, he bent and picked up a folded scrap of paper which rustled in the stillness, as he twitched it open.

It was the face of a square envelope from which the flap and back had been hastily torn away. The blank side was covered with lines of fine, hurried writing, which bore no superscription nor signature, yet Calhoun's eyes sparkled, as he held it to the light.

I am terrified at hearing no sound from you. Through the bars I can just make out that awful hole. It looks as if it might lead into some cellar, and I can only hope and pray that you have not been badly injured. For hours I've sat here listening, not daring to call out, feeling horribly to blame for your mishap. But dawn is breaking, and they will soon be here to wake us. I don't know why I'm writing this, which I shall push through the bars and drop into that black hole. Perhaps you'll never get it. But I feel somehow as if I must try and let you know how truly grateful I am for your warning, even if I seem to disregard it. For I've thought it all over—dozens and dozens of times—and I *must* go on in spite of everything. It isn't that I don't believe you; I *do*—truly! But, though the

thought terrifies me, I'm afraid it's too late now to turn back. If only there had been time for me to tell you a little, perhaps you could have helped——

The note ended abruptly in a wavering penciled dash. Blaze pictured the girl, startled by the expected summons, folding it with nervous haste and flinging it through the bars into the opening beneath. How long had it lain here, he wondered? He read it through again, struck by the anxiety she showed for him, stirred strongly by the unconscious appeal for help with which it ended. Turning it over he found that the face of the envelope bore a Mexican stamp, the postmark "San Jago," and it was addressed in a fine, precise, yet masculine hand to "Miss Cynthia Carstairs, Silver City, New Mexico."

Brows puckered, Blaze stared thoughtfully at the name for a moment or two. Then all at once his glance slid past the paper and rested on the earthen floor of the recess, now for the first time clearly visible in the light of day.

Hoofprints! What were they doing in this recess, all pointing in the same direction—toward the blank, outer wall of stone and adobe? Color deepening under his tan, he swiftly put away the letter and stepped forward to examine the wall closely.

The smooth, adobe surface was meshed by a multitude of cracks, natural enough, most of them. But as Blaze studied that smooth, flat surface, certain of those cracks, deeper, more worn, and more crumbling than the rest, suddenly combined to form a sort of rectangle, some eight feet by three, the edges ragged and uneven, but still approximately continuous and straight.

Eyes sparkling, he passed his fingers inquiringly over these cracks. Then dropping suddenly on his knees, he thrust one hand into that crevice near the floor, below which lay the fallen stone.

He found a hollow wider at the back by several inches than the loose, square stone, and almost at once his exploring fingers closed over a stout metal rod terminating in a heavy flange. Gripping the latter, he pulled with all his strength. Slowly at first the rod moved. Then suddenly there came a little click, a section of the adobe wall quivered and gave a bit, those deeper cracks widening noticeably. With a muttered exclamation Blaze sprang up and, thrusting both hands into the vertical crevice, dragged open a heavy, ponderous door fashioned of oak, with a thin veneer of adobe fastened in some manner to its outer side. Beyond the door lay the beginning of a dark, arched tunnel sloping gently downward and leading away from the cellar in a generally southwesterly direction.

"Man, oh, man!" ejaculated Calhoun.

Hoofprints were plainly visible in the tunnel floor, all pointing away from the cellar, none returning. The air, though damp and cold, was fresh enough. Suddenly Blaze gave a low laugh.

"Clever, clever Lopo!" he exclaimed softly. "But then a wolf usually is clever. The stolen horses were brought here through the other door, probably with hoofs padded. They left by the tunnel, which I'll bet comes out somewhere close to the river. No wonder the sheriff and those others never found a trace of them."

Without hesitation he stepped into the passage and drew the door shut after him. The bolt, operated from the other side by the heavy bar, had here simply to be pushed into its socket. Calhoun knew that it would be no bar against pursuit, but if Garcia or the others entered the cellar room and found no trace at all of any alien presence, at least they would be mystified.

Counting his steps to gauge the distance, Blaze moved forward through the pitch darkness, fingers lightly

touching the right-hand wall of the tunnel, which was constructed of rough stone laid in mortar. The downward slope was slight, and presently he had a notion that the tunnel had ceased to dip and was running along the level. Whether or not it curved a little to one side or the other, he could not tell; at least there were no abrupt turns.

Of one thing he was very soon convinced: This subterranean passage owed its existence neither to Garcia or any other greaser. The immense labor involved was far beyond these people to whom sustained toil is abhorrent and whose "to-morrow" never comes. It was more likely a part of those ancient stone foundations, conceived and carried out by the old monks, as a means of hiding or escape from the Indians. Garcia had merely found and adapted it to his own crooked ends.

At length, when he had covered what he roughly guessed to be about a thousand feet, Blaze found that the tunnel floor was beginning to slope upward. He went on more slowly, with one hand thrust out before him, and presently his fingers touched a solid barrier.

Investigation proved this to be a heavy oaken door equipped with the same sort of fastenings as the other. Cautiously sliding back the bolt, for he had no idea what he was coming out on, Calhoun drew his automatic and pushed gently against the planking.

The door gave slightly, and through the narrow crack Blaze glimpsed a jumble of gray rock, a sweeping branch of dark cedar, the dappling touch of sunlight falling through masses of green leaves. The silence was reassuringly profound and so, putting his shoulder against the door—which seemed much heavier and more unweildly than the other—he shoved it open and stepped alertly forth.

He stood on the summit of a little mound rising close to the river bank. A mass of great boulders spanned two sides of it, and smaller ones lay scattered over the other slopes, mingling with a growth of twisted, stunted cedars and desert oak. Reaching down into the stream and half across it was a flat, narrow, rocky spine, above which the branches of the cottonwoods—rooted in the moister soil nearer the water—met and tangled. It was a most admirably sheltered, secret little spot, and Calhoun instantly perceived how easy it would be to ride a horse down that gently sloping rock straight into the river without leaving behind a single betraying hoofprint. But how, in the name of all the mysteries, was the outside of the tunnel door concealed?

Whirling swiftly, his eyes widened, as he took in the extraordinary cleverness of the device. The tunnel emerged between two massive boulders standing close together, with a third lying across the crevice. The opening had been roughly squared up inside with stone and mortar and massive upright timbers, to which the door was fitted. Against the outer side of that door thin slabs of natural rock had been bolted—the sunken heads covered with a gray cement—their edges lapping over each other and over the artificial work with an ingenuity truly amazing. Artfully placed rocks covered all the exposed work, and the softening hand of time and nature had done the rest. With this door closed and the bolt operated through a tiny concealed crevice, the whole surface blended perfectly with its surroundings.

CHAPTER VII.

BLAZE TAKES THE TRAIL.

AT any other time Blaze would have thoroughly enjoyed carefully examining every detail of this surprising piece of craftsmanship. As it was, he merely satisfied his curiosity, closed and bolted the door, and, scrambling down

to the river, moved swiftly upstream, keeping cautiously within the shelter of the trees and undergrowth.

About a hundred yards from the rocky outcropping that marked the end of the tunnel, he crossed a shallow gully cutting eastward from the river between two gently rolling slopes. Through it he glimpsed a sweep of hills, along the base of which, he knew, ran the trail leading south from Charvas before it curved across the border and plunged into the rugged fastness of the Sierra Madres.

This way the girl had gone under the guidance of that soft-tongued, treacherous Cordova. Blaze wasted no time in speculating on the motive which lay behind that treachery, or the reason why Miss Carstairs had so evidently of her own accord placed herself in the power of the smooth villain. The important thing was to figure out where they were going, and Calhoun had already done that, with what seemed to him fair accuracy.

Las Hermanas meant nothing to him. But San Jago, so significantly printed on the torn envelope in his pocket, was the name of a once-thriving town centered around some rich silver mines lying in the mountains some thirty miles south of the border. They had been the property of an immensely wealthy Spaniard whose name Blaze had forgotten. He recalled, however, the fact that the man had been forced to fly the country, leaving the mines to be worked spasmodically by the various rebel forces that surged incessantly over this harried section of Mexico. San Jago was the only settlement of any consequence within reach of the border, the country to the west being chiefly a vast unpeopled stretch of desert. And some one had evidently lately written to the girl from there. Taken all in all, Calhoun's conclusions seemed reasonable to him. He wished it were as easy to decide what to do.

Inclination pulled one way strongly. Though the girl had not actually appealed to him for help, he could not rid his mind of the last few words of her hurried note, nor did he want to. She had tried gallantly to hide her doubts and fears, but for an instant these had peeped out from behind her brave reticence, stirring Calhoun to an instant, chivalrous response. The only thing that held him back was the strong atmosphere of secrecy which seemed to envelope her mysterious errand. She had evidently left home without confiding in a single soul, and she might resent the interference of a stranger as an impertinent intrusion.

"But, shucks!" muttered Calhoun, as he walked on rapidly, searching the trees ahead and to his right for any sign of the road house or its occupants. "I don't reckon she's that kind, though of course you can't ever tell." Suddenly his lips widened in a grin. "Little previous, aren't you, fellow?" he apostrophized. "Before you start boiling into Mexico I'd say you'd better get straddled of a cayuse. I wish to thunder I hadn't tied Blueskin quite so near that house."

It wasn't the first time he had regretted what had seemed safe enough last night, but which now threatened to complicate things enormously. Of course there might be a chance that Garcia and his men had so far failed to discover the presence of the roan in that little thicket just off the trail. But Blaze had an underlying impression that luck wasn't going to be with him to that incredible extent. Of course he must make sure, though, and to that end—counting on the rear of the building being safer than the front—he planned to steal past under cover of the trees. He experienced his first check when, rounding an abrupt bend, he saw ahead of him through a scanty screen of leaves a considerable section of the bank completely cleared of vegi-

tation. Between the long, irregular rear of the adobe building and the river the ground was as bare almost as a ploughed field. Moreover in the nearer foreground loomed up the low, crumbling walls and sagging roofs of a group of outbuildings, from the neighborhood of which came the murmur of voices.

Studying the situation, Blaze perceived that by making a long detour he might pass unseen among the trees and thickets on the opposite side of the river. But this meant considerable delay, and he finally decided to do a little reconnoitering first. Stealing through the last fringe of bushes, he gained the rear of the nearest shack, crept along to the outer corner, and, dropping down on hands and knees, thrust his head cautiously beyond the wall.

What he saw brought a quick gleam of interest and speculation into his eyes. Tied to a rough hitching rack was Blueskin, ears laid back, submitting with evident distaste to a close examination at the hands of Lopo Garcia and the greaser, Juan, who had played the part of cook the night before.

From where he crouched in the shadow Blaze could have shot them both without difficulty. But the very ease and simplicity of the thing held his hand. In spite of what he knew them for he could not bring himself to kill a man from ambush. He might have held them up, but this would give at least one of them a chance to gain the shelter of the shed. Also there were at least two others to consider. And so, though he silently drew his automatic, Blaze remained quietly in hiding, watching the two closely and listening to their shrill, excited chatter.

The roan had apparently only just been discovered and brought around to these dilapidated stables. Garcia, of course, recognized him, and the talk centered chiefly on the identity and mysterious disappearance of his owner. Calhoun smiled grimly, as he caught the undercurrent of uneasiness in the voices and manner of the two criminals, who could so ill afford to court investigation. And then of a sudden his eyes narrowed, and his fingers tightened on the automatic, as he saw Garcia undoing the flap of the right-hand saddle pocket.

In this were the well-filled note books containing the result of his five weeks of hard labor in the desert and the flats comprising that wide-spreading basin he had been sent out to investigate. Here were the names of property owners, the size of their holdings, in many cases the amounts for which they would sell this apparently waste land. There were also masses of rough notes regarding elevations and the like, which would be of great value to the Carson Company in carrying out their projected irrigation scheme. If these were lost, if even the fact was known that the company contemplated such a work, the damage would be irreparable. Harmon, the chief engineer, had been emphatic in his caution that not a hint of it must leak out until they had a chance to secure the necessary land at a reasonable figure.

Watching the thick, muscular fingers twitch at the leather flap, Blaze slowly raised his gun and trained it on the unconscious greaser. At any cost the fellow must not see those notes. As the flap was lifted, Calhoun's lips parted for a curt challenge; but, before he snapped out the word, there came a sudden, unexpected interruption. From the neighborhood of the house a man cried out something in shrill excitement, at which both Mexicans whirled around and stared wide-eyed in that direction.

"What is it?" shouted Garcia in Spanish.

The reply, which Blaze could not make out, was evidently sufficiently startling in its nature. Garcia's narrowed eyes flashed.

"That cursed gringo, of a certainty," he snarled furiously. "He has found—— No, Juan; wait here until I call."

He disappeared behind the front of the shed, and, as Blaze listened to his hurried footfalls padding up the slope, he straightened slowly and stood upright, his thoughtful gaze intent on the remaining Mexican.

They had discovered the open trap, of course. How long it would take them to find out that the secret cellar was empty he had no notion, but he did not intend to wait. Juan, standing close by the farther corner of the shed, back toward him and hands on hips, was staring intently in the opposite direction. Such a chance of recovering the roan was not likely to come again, and without delaying an instant Blaze stepped out from behind the building and moved swiftly and noiselessly forward.

The Mexican seemed completely absorbed, and all would have gone well, save for Blueskin himself. As Calhoun approached, the horse suddenly turned his wise head, pricked up his ears, and jerked back on the reins twisted around the hitching rack. The horse's action would have attracted the attention of a half-wit.

A matter of some twelve feet separated Calhoun from the greaser. He cleared it in three great bounds which brought him to Juan's side, just as the latter whirled around. Into the fellow's eyes there leaped a look of horror; his lips parted before a frightened yell for help. But already Calhoun's upraised hand was flashing downward so swiftly that, before the man could make a sound, the barrel of the automatic crashed against his forehead and sent him crumpling to the ground.

Blaze caught him, as he fell, and dropped his limp body down beside the shed. Darting to the hitching rack, which stood out in full view of the side of the road house, he untied the knots with dexterous fingers and jerked the reins free. As he flung himself into the saddle, a startled yell came from the slope above; he caught a glimpse of Garcia springing up from beside the open trap and the glint of sunlight from his lifting Colt. But already the roan was moving, and when the shot came an instant later, the bullet clipped off a fragment of adobe from the shed wall around which Blaze had just spurred the animal.

"Good boy," said Calhoun, making for the river. His head was thrown back; a dancing devil flashed and sparkled in his brown eyes. "Nice work that was, fellah. We'll beat 'em yet—easy."

Scrambling down the bank, the roan plunged into the stream with a great splash and galloped on, the water reaching barely to his knees. Beyond that first light touch Blaze had not used his spurs; there was no need. As he whirled around the bend, a bullet whined through the trees to one side, followed swiftly by another, but both went wild. Peering intently through the trunks and drooping branches, Blaze suddenly turned the roan in toward the bank and urged him up the slope. A willow whip lashed his face; a leaf or two fluttered down through the dappled, cool, green shadows. Then horse and man plunged out into a blaze of sunlight and headed for the gulch. Through its short length Blueskin sped on at unabated speed and gained the trail. As Calhoun reined him southward, he recalled briefly Harmon's final, curt admonition that he must be back in Tucson with his report in four weeks or, at the very latest, five. His eyes sparkled, and he laughed aloud.

"And it was five weeks yesterday," he chuckled. "I hope Harmie's a good waiter."

A rifle bullet whined past him and

buried itself in the rock-strewn slope to his left. Blaze laughed again and, twisting in his saddle, saw a squat, heavy figure standing far, far back in the middle of the straight and level trail, rifle to his shoulder.

"Shoot away, shoot away, Lopo!" he exclaimed pleasantly. "No greaser living could hit the side of a barn door at that distance."

Presently a turn in the trail carried him out of sight of Garcia and the whole neighborhood of that gloomy road house, and he rode on, filled with a sudden keen zest and joy in life. His hand had been forced, though he had a feeling that he would have gone this way in any case. Back of him lay crowded, bustling Tucson, the offices he hated, Harmon whom he disliked. Ahead, the lonely trail ribboned on through the low hills toward the distant, rugged mountains, their jagged peaks etched like velvet shadows against the brilliant skies. The call of duty pulled but lightly against the lure of romance and adventure that dragged him forward. For somewhere amid those fir-clad slopes and rugged, rock-bound mountain valleys a girl with wistful, troubled, courageous eyes of gray looked back and beckoned.

CHAPTER VIII.

FOREBODINGS.

THE sun was well past the zenith, and Blaze Calhoun was ravenously hungry, when a sudden twist in the mountain trail brought him unexpectedly into the very dooryard of a tiny hut set at the mouth of a narrow, fertile valley. It was too late to draw back. Standing in front of the little house was a short, stocky Mexican, whose black, beady eyes were already regarding him with curiosity, if not suspicion. Blaze returned the stare blandly and, drawing rein beside the man, looked down smilingly.

"Buenas dias," he drawled pleasantly, in fluent Spanish. "Is it long since my friend, Señor Cordova, and his party passed?"

The Mexican's manner thawed at once. "But a scant hour," he returned readily. "The señor is a friend of Cordova, yes?"

"Of a surety. We are in the same venture. An hour, you say? Then I may hope to overtake him before sunset, even with a little rest now. It is hungry riding through these mountains, and I have eaten nothing since before dawn. Perhaps you can——"

"But certainly," nodded the fellow readily, as Blaze paused invitingly. "If the señor will dismount, I will prepare a meal, though it will be of the simplest."

Calhoun swung down from his saddle and shook the stiffness out of his legs.

"Whatever is ready—tortillas, a bit of meat, anything will serve," he said, throwing the reins over the roan's head. "If I am to rejoin Cordova to-night I must not delay too long."

The Mexican led the way into the hut, and Blaze followed, right hand hooked lightly in his belt, though he did not really anticipate danger. The fellow was of the simple-minded peasant type who, though he might knife an enemy with no more compunction than he would kill a sheep, was quite harmless, once Calhoun's supposed connection with Cordova was fixed in his mind. He made haste to draw a bench up to a rough table and with many apologies produced a plate of tortillas and a partly consumed joint of mutton, upon which Blaze fell at once with avidity. But, though he was ravenous, and food had never seemed to taste so good before, he did not neglect this opportunity of acquiring information.

Casually, with deft light touches and a manner of gracious condescension, which experience had taught him would

be agreeable to this type of Mexican, he soon had his host chattering voluably. Miguel Pegano was evidently a bit of a gossip, and apparently there were few happenings in the surrounding country of which he was not to some extent informed. That there was some more or less intimate connection between the fellow and Cordova, Blaze soon guessed. But no details were volunteered, and he felt it would be unwise to probe too deeply. Pegano himself showed no false delicacy in asking point-blank questions.

"The señor has arranged to meet Cordova in case he does not overtake him on the roan?" he inquired during an early pause in the conversation.

"Surely," returned Calhoun readily. Recalling the conversation he had overheard in the road house he felt himself on tolerably secure ground. "He is going to Las Hermanas."

"Naturally," shrugged the Mexican. "It is his home. A splendid hacienda! I remember it in the days of the tyrant, De Valenzula, on whom I spit." He illustrated the curse with copious realism. "Happily he was forced to fly empty-handed, which was fortunate for our friend, on whom descended the rich furnishings almost unimpaired."

Calhoun's thick lashes drooped swiftly to hide the sudden triumphant sparkle in his eyes. De Valenzula was the name he had forgotten—the name of that wealthy, banished owner of the silver mines at San Jago, whose hacienda would naturally be located somewhere near the town. The chance clew had worked out well. He wished he might as easily solve the puzzle of Cynthia Carstairs' presence here in Cordova's company. Had she come in response to that letter? If so, who had written it? Neither an American nor an Englishman, Blaze felt sure. The writing on the scrap of envelope in his pocket bore a distinct likeness to the hand of Mexican or Spaniard.

"It will be a pleasure to our friend," resumed Pegano, "to be able to offer so illustrious a guest such luxurious accommodation."

Calhoun glanced up, and nodded, his surprise and curiosity concealed beneath an admirable affectation of understanding.

"To be sure," he drawled, feeling in his pocket for the makings. "You mean, of course——"

The garrulous Mexican took instant advantage of the slight pause.

"General Ortiz—naturally. There is but one such as he, for whom nothing is too good. From his exhalted station does he not look down graciously upon the poor and see and understand? Has he not from the beginning waged relentless warfare on the wealthy leaches like De Valenzula, who trod upon us and sucked from the people their hard-earned savings. Is it not he who remits taxes and rents and is our friend? It is an honor to have him back among us even for a little while."

He paused, sharp, beady eyes fixed curiously on Calhoun, whose attention seemed at the moment fixed on the deft, meticulous fashioning of a cigarette.

"One wonders a little what has brought him here," he went on insinuatingly. "For ten days now he has been taking his ease at Las Hermanas, as who should not, of course. But for one so active as his excellency, it seems a little strange. Perhaps the señor, of his superior wisdom, might deign to drop a hint."

Calhoun lit his cigarette and, resting one elbow on the table, inhaled deeply. "For myself, *mi amigo,* I should be glad to," he returned graciously. "You are a good fellow, I see, and a safe one. But in a matter such as this one must obey orders."

"Ah!" sighed the Mexican resignedly. "An affair of state! The señor is of course right to remain silent. Is it permitted," he went on ingratiatingly,

"to ask of the Señor Cordova's beautiful, blonde companion? Ah! *Deliciosa—encantadar!*" He kissed the tips of his stubby brown fingers. "She, too, perhaps——"

Calhoun pushed back the stool and stood up. "That, also, is a matter of which I must not speak," he returned quietly, with no hint in voice or manner of the sudden turmoil of anxious misgiving which had surged up within him. "You will permit me," he added, placing a silver dollar on the table. "Not as payment for your hospitality, but to drink my health. Drink, *mi amigo,* to the welfare of a soldier of fortune and success to his enterprise."

Pegano protested volubly that he would not dream of accepting money from a friend of Luis Cordova, but it did not need much pressing to induce him to change his mind and pocket the coin. In high good humor he followed Blaze out into the open, and, as the American mounted and rode away, he called down benedictions on his head, mingled with several pleasant messages to their mutual friend.

"Which I'll deliver, all right—with interest," muttered Calhoun, when the little hut and its smiling owner had disappeared behind him. "He's even a greater villain than I thought. Ortiz! What the devil does it all mean, anyhow?"

For of Ramon Ortiz, whom he knew well—at least by reputation—he had never heard a single decent thing. Well named "The Tiger of Chihuahua," this suave, smooth, smiling villain was the curse of western Mexico. As cold as ice, as hard as marble, utterly unscrupulous and apparently without human feelings, he hid these qualities beneath a thin veneer of geniality and heartiness which, coupled with a cheap, surface generosity, caught the fancy of the ignorant peasants and caused them to hail him as a friend and patron of the poor. A little parceling out of confiscated land, the flinging about with large gestures of chaff left from the rich threshing of stolen wheat which poured into his own secret coffers, completed the work. The wealthy and high-born, the real patriots, men of brains and of affairs, who had at heart the welfare of their country, feared and hated him, yet dared not move openly against him because of his immense popularity with the masses. His accumulations were said to be enormous, and still he went on bleeding the upper and middle classes in the province where he held sway, often, it was whispered by methods beside which the tortures of war paled.

Suddenly Calhoun swore luridly and spurred the roan to greater speed. The mere thought of that lovely, gray-eyed American girl under the same roof with such a villain, at once roused him to a fury and tortured him with keen, chilling apprehension.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HACIENDA.

THE sun was sinking behind the mountains in a welter of angry crimson, as Calhoun halted at the mouth of a narrow pass and looked down on the settlement of San Jago. Clustered snugly in a long, narrow valley the houses, embowered in green and set down, each in the midst of a little garden plot, had a pleasing air of tranquility and peace. Even the unlovely outlines of the smelter and mine buildings, with the great bare sloping ore dump, which crowned a broad plateau several hundred feet above the village, did not seem to detract from that impression—an impression so utterly at odds with the feelings of the man astride the blue roan.

It was not difficult to pick out the hacienda, Las Harmanas. It lay on the gently sloping hillside midway between the pass and the smelter—a long,

irregular, picturesque structure on several levels, covered with mines and creepers and surrounded by thick masses of shrubbery, the whole encircled by a high stone wall. It was approached by a well-made, though narrow, road which branched off from the main trail several hundred feet below the pass and curved along the slope toward an elaborate gateway set in the middle of the front wall.

Calhoun studied the situation for a moment or two and then, drawing from his saddle pocket a pair of field glasses, focused them on the building and its surroundings.

The powerful lenses cleared up a number of interesting details not visible to the naked eye. Besides the hacienda proper, there were several minor buildings within the wall, as well as a low, substantial structure lying outside of it, close against the stretch nearest Calhoun. Blaze now perceived that the road continued on past the gate to disappear in a mass of trees beyond which lay the smelter. Finally, training his glass upon the entrance, he discovered that this was flanked by a pair of ornamental stone lodges about which clustered a number of slouchy Mexican soldiers, several of them carrying rifles.

"His excellency's bodyguard," murmured Calhoun with a slight sneer. "The blackguard never travels without them."

But, as he had not expected to approach the hacienda from the front, the discovery was in no way disappointing. Shifting the glass of the building along the wide wall, he decided after a brief scrutiny that it was used as a stable. At least in the stout corral adjoining were a number of horses, and about the open door lounged more soldiers or hostlers, to the number of three or four.

Apparently the only means of getting into the hacienda grounds was by climbing the rear wall, and here Blaze received his first measure of encouragement. Outside of it the trees clustered thickly, their branches sweeping over the wall here and there, and in many cases hiding it entirely from view. Within, tall masses of shrubbery growing in wild, untended luxuriance, seemed completely to fill that section of the grounds. It ought to be a simple matter to approach the house from that direction. Of course, getting out again might prove an altogether different matter, but Blaze wasn't bothering his head about that just now. To make the best of the fading daylight he must act swiftly, and so without further delay he pocketed the field glasses, picked up his reins, and rode out of the rugged pass onto the descending trail.

Backed by dark masses of rock and forest-covered slopes, he had slight fear of being seen by the soldiers about the hacienda gates, and there was still less risk of observation from the town. The sun had dropped below a bank of dark clouds, from which wide shafts of lurid crimson shot up into the heavens, tinging the sky with a strange, almost sinister glow. For a brief space the western windows of Las Harmanas gleamed blood-red, as if the hacienda was filled with raging flames. Then all at once the light faded and died, and in the valley lapping shadows reached out to dim the brilliant outlines of the white-washed houses, while down the mountainside there swept a damp, cold wind heavy with the promise of coming rain.

Reflecting that this might not prove altogether a disadvantage, Blaze pushed on steadily and presently left the trail for the hacienda road. Evidently constructed at great expense, this cut across the slope taking advantage of natural levels. At one time it hugged the edge of some sharp descent, again it curved back among the oaks and ocote pines, hidden alike from town and hacienda.

It was at one of these inner curves that Blaze perceived ahead a long open

stretch, where the road was carried across a shallow gulch by an artificial causeway, terminating close to the hacienda wall. To venture on it would be to court discovery, so he turned his horse abruptly into the woods to the left and rode on slowly through the trees.

The going was not as difficult as he had expected. He guessed, indeed, that at some previous time—during the height of De Valenzula's prosperity, no doubt—these woods had been carefully cleared of undergrowth and turned into a sort of park. In the succeeding interval of neglect, thickets had grown up again, but, though they gave plenty of cover, they were not dense enough to greatly impede progress.

Swerving steadily to the right, Calhoun came at length to a shallow gulch, along the bottom of which trickled a little brook. Dismounting he drank and let the roan take his fill of the cold, pure water. A dozen paces upstream a great, gnarled oak overhung the bank, a giant among its fellows and difficult to miss even in the dark, once one stumbled on the stream. Here Blaze tied the horse and, pushing on through the thickets, approached the low adobe stables which stood outside the wall.

The gathering clouds and swiftly falling twilight made it safe to approach within a reasonable distance. Indeed, he might have safely ventured even closer, for the hostlers had by this time gone indoors for supper. Through an open window to the left of the door, Blaze counted five of them gathered around a rough table, on which stood a lighted lamp. Then he slipped silently on past the corral, observing the position of the gate, sizing up the horses, noting saddles flung carelessly on the ground, or draped across the top rail of the inclosure. Circling this, he sped on close to the wall, gained the corner, and, turning it, plunged into the deep shadows of the encroaching forest.

From the pass he had gauged roughly the position of the house, and so he did not pause now until he had reached a spot he judged was directly back of it. Scrambling into the crotch of a tree, he swung himself hand over hand along a limb which hung over the wall, alighted for an instant on the coping, and then dropped down into a luxurious tangle of acasias and mimosas.

The wind had heightened, and even in this sheltered place erratic gusts whirled through the garden, tossing the branches of the shrubbery and stirring the leaves to a constant rustling movement. Creeping through the bushes Blaze came to a little clearing in which stood an empty fountain basin of carved stone, almost smothered in riotous creepers. The air was filled with the scent of jasmine, of roses, of countless other unseen flowers, almost cloying in their sweetness. Circling the fountain, Blaze struck a paved walk and followed it. Presently, pushing through an arbor where a shower of fragrant white petals descended on his head, he perceived the hacienda looming up through the darkness just ahead.

The blackness of that long, irregular facade was relieved only by three lighted rectangles set at widely separated intervals. The nearest one was just above Calhoun's head, a small, closed casement, some six feet to one side of a little stone-railed balcony, upon which opened a pair of long French windows. These he saw on close inspection were ajar, but the aperture was covered by drawn curtains of some heavy stuff which cut off all but a thin line of light.

A mass of vines covered the wall with cascades of living green, their stems, Blaze discovered, as thick as a man's wrist. To reach the balcony by their aid would be easy enough, but without knowing who might be within that room Blaze felt it would be wiser, perhaps, to try some more obscure en-

trance first. As he turned away and moved along the wall, a splash of rain struck against his face, and all about him he heard the steady patter of it on the leaves.

"All the better," he reflected with satisfaction. "These greasers hate like thunder to get wet; they'll all be scurrying to cover and leave the way clear for me."

Rounding the corner of the building he paused first at one grated window and then another. It began to look as if all those on the lower floor were thus protected, as if he would have to chance the balcony after all. But still he kept on toward a lighted opening which pierced the wall a little farther on. At least it would do no harm to see what was going on within that room; might even help by giving him an idea as to just how the various members of the household were distributed.

As he drew nearer it became evident that a goodly number were making merry there. The sound of raucous laughter, the chatter of many voices, once a sudden, rather maudlin, snatch of song prepared him a little for the scene which met his eyes, as he peered cautiously through the lower part of the iron grille.

The room was long and stately and showed in its disordered furnishings many evidences of past magnificence. There were tapestries on the walls, a mantle of carved marble, a glittering crystal chandelier. But the hangings were slit and ragged, the marble chipped, the heavy rosewood furniture gouged and stained, the whole apartment untidy and unkempt.

Around a great dining table, glittering with candles, six or eight men were drinking. More than one, indeed, to judge from their slouching bodies, was already drunk. A slim, beardless, vacuous youth was swaying on his feet, one hand clutching the table for support, a wineglass lifted in the other, as he thickly proposed a toast. In the midst of it another staggered to his feet, took a few stumbling steps in the direction of the fireplace, tripped suddenly, and crashed headlong against a heavy fender of tarnished bronze. From the farther end of the long table there came a low, hard, callous laugh which instantly drew Calhoun's glance toward the man who lounged there in a great carved chair.

"Ortiz!" he muttered, eyes narrowing.

He had never seen the man save once, but it was not a face to be easily forgotten. Dark, narrow, boldly handsome it was, if one could forget the cruel mouth and lines of dissipation which stamped it deeply. The hand toying with the stem of a Venetian wineglass, was slim and shapely and aristocratic, yet as supple and strong as the talons of a tiger. In the early thirties, perhaps, his thick, black, smoothly moulded hair showed not a ruffled lock. In his eyes, cold, brilliant, scintillating, was no trace of intoxication. Either he had been more temperate than the rest, or else, as Blaze had heard, his capacity was unlimited.

For a moment or two the American critically surved that lounging figure in the gorgeous uniform ablaze with decorations, the gold hilt of a military sword resting against the arm of his chair. Then his glance flashed swiftly around the table seeking Luis Cordova. He failed to find the man, and, stung by a sudden vague sense of apprehension, he was turning from the window, when a hand suddenly gripped his arm, and above the hissing of the pelting rain a hoarse voice in Spanish ordered him to halt.

With the lithe swiftness of a panther Calhoun tore his wrist loose, and lashed out at the figure looming up beside him. It was an amazing blow—swift, sure, accurate, with all his weight and every ounce of his splendid strength behind

it. His clenched fist struck the point of the man's chin with terrific force, flinging the man's head back and sending him toppling backward to the ground, a crumpled, silent heap.

For an instant Blaze stood motionless over him, an exquisite pain shooting through his knuckles. Then he swiftly turned his head and glanced through the open window. No one in the room had stirred. The youth still swayed and staggered, trying to phrase his maudlin toast. The huddled heap lay unheeded on the hearth. Lounging in his great chair, a spiral of smoke rising from his cigarette, Ortiz continued to regard his companions with that same cold, heavy-lidded, slightly sardonic disdain. Evidently the howling wind and beating rain had drowned all other sounds.

Brushing the moisture from his face, Calhoun knelt hastily and felt about the body of the unconscious man. His fingers encountered a serape wrapped around the Mexican's shoulder, and, swiftly removing it, he tore it into strips. With these he securely tied the fellow's hands and feet and gagged him. Then, leaping up, he ran back along the hacienda wall, ducked around the corner, and halted beneath the little balcony, soaked to the skin, the water streaming from his soggy hat brim.

He had no definite plan save that he felt somehow that he must not lose another moment in trying to locate Cynthia Carstairs. That scene in the dining room had turned him sick with apprehension. The absence of Cordova also troubled him acutely. It was difficult to believe that he and his party had not reached the hacienda, and yet, if he was in the house, why was he not there with his other boon companions?

Somehow the situation seemed ominous, and without delay Blaze gripped the tough vines, drew himself up until he could reach the balcony, and flung one leg over the stone railing. At that moment a woman's voice came to him from the room within, muffled a little by the heavy curtains, but entirely clear and familiar:

"You—beast! You—you coward! You, a Cordova, have done what the lowest dregs would shrink from. Why, Manuel there would no more dream——"

She broke off with a stifled sob of mingled anger and nervous terror, which sent the hot color flaming into Calhoun's face. Jaws set like a steel trap, he stepped over the rain-swept railing and reached swiftly for his automatic. The holster hanging at his side was empty!

CHAPTER X.

HOPE DIES.

HER hand still resting caressingly on the shoulder of the young man roped securely into the heavy mahogany armchair, Cynthia Carstairs slowly turned her head and regarded Luis Cordova with a dazed, uncomprehending look—a look, however, in which suspicion was swiftly gathering. In that first revulsion of feeling at seeing her brother in perfect health instead of lying, as she had been told, almost on his death bed, there had been room in her mind for nothing save supreme thankfulness. But now that she was beginning to recover herself; those doubts and fears, which had begun to trouble her the night before and continued to gain strength with every passing hour, poured back, filling her with dread and apprehension.

"I don't understand," she said slowly, trying hard to keep her voice steady. "What does this mean? You said——"

"I'll tell you what it means, Cynthy," suddenly broke in Hugh Carstairs.

At the first sight of his sister his handsome, clean-cut face had turned a ghastly white, and into his gray eyes—so like and yet unlike those of the girl beside him—there flashed a look of

utter, devastating horror. That horror lingered, tempered a little by growing rage and a sort of wild, frantic belief—against all probability and reason—that the ghastly specter which he saw hovering in the background *must* somehow be kept at bay.

"It means," he went on swiftly, in a sort of cold fury, "that this man we've known for years and thought was a decent fellow, is nothing but a scoundrel, his pretended friendship as false as his lying face. In the first place he got me here by a trick. Ever since they had to fly in the night, Rita's been pining for some things they had to leave behind—knicknacks, trinkets that were her mother's. He found it out somehow, and when he was in Silver City two weeks ago, while you were visiting the Summers, he told me that if I could slip over here on the quiet he'd gladly turn them over to me. Like a fool I bit. It seemed safe enough. At the time of the grand bust-up the people were all against me, because I was in with De Valenzula and superintendent of the mines. But there'd been time for all that feeling to evaporate. And like you, I trusted him."

He laughed harshly and flashed a glance of bitter scorn at the slim, suave Mexican who lounged indolently against the wall, smoking a cigarette thrust into a long, amber holder.

"Funny, isn't it? I thought that all those years of intimacy—those years when you were off at school in the States—meant something. I wanted most awfully to do that much for Rita. So I took him at his word and rode over here to step into his trap, like any brainless fool."

Cynthia stared at him with troubled, puckered brows. "But what is it all about? What trap? I still don't understand."

"Of course you don't," returned her brother. "How should you? I hadn't come to that. He's got it into his head that when the smash came, and we had to beat it for the border with practically nothing but the clothes we stood up in, we took the bullion out of the strong room and hid or buried it somewhere to keep it from Ortiz and his gang of cutthroat rebels. That mythical bullion is to be the price of my liberty. If I tell him where it's hidden, I go free—perhaps!"

"Mythical?" repeated Cynthia quickly. "You mean, Hugh, that there isn't any such thing?"

"Not this side the border," returned Carstairs. "About four days before the smash came the chief began to get worried at conditions, especially with such a lot of bullion stored here, and sent it off at night by a bunch of Americans he'd got over from Bisbee for that purpose. That's what I've been telling Cordova all along, but he won't believe me. Because he happened to be down at Almogordo at the time and knew nothing about it—as De Valenzula took mighty good care neither he nor any other Mexican should—he thinks I'm lying."

Cordova daintily flicked the ash from his cigarette and smiled slowly. "A very pretty story," he murmured, "but as I've already told you more than once it happens to be false. In my official capacity I knew to an ounce the weight of silver in the strong room. Returning from Almogordo I took pains to notice that the cases containing it had not been moved."

"Naturally," snapped Carstairs, "since the ingots were packed on the mules in heavy sacks, and those cases were left exactly as they were—on purpose."

"And a score of mules with as many drivers crossed the border, came here, loaded up, and went away again without a soul in San Jago or about the hacienda being the wiser?" commented Cordova skeptically.

"They came at night and left at night,

taking the mountain trail," the prisoner retorted impatiently. "We took good care that no one should see them while they were here. If our suspicions had proved groundless, and there had been no revolution, De Valenzula did not wish to be in a position seemingly to mistrust the government."

"Ah, yes," murmured the Mexican. "You Americans have a saying—'it listens well.' How is it you account for my finding the strong room open the morning after your departure, and those cases broken into fragments."

"I don't—I can't. Some one must have broken in after we had gone, expecting to loot the place. I've told you that a dozen times already."

"The señor has," agreed Cordova suavely. "And I congratulate him on his persistence in sticking to this fable. But now that the señorita is here, perhaps he will see the necessity of giving way."

Again Carstairs' ruddy color faded, and that look of veiled horror lurked in the eyes he turned upon his sister.

"Whatever induced you to come, Cynthy?" he groaned. "How could you bring yourself to make this trip alone with only Mandy? Wasn't there anybody to stop you? De Valenzula—Marsters—any one of our friends ought to have prevented your going."

"I didn't tell them," the girl answered slowly. "The letter said I shouldn't—that it would be dangerous to risk letting any one know that you had returned to Mexico, because of the ill feeling that was still strong against all the mine officials. If it leaked out while you were in San Jago, it might mean——"

"Letter? What letter?" broke in Carstairs sharply. "I wrote no letter except that note I left telling you I had gone away on business for a few days."

"I know," said Cynthia quietly. "It was supposed to have been dictated by you to Cordova. In it was the news that you were very ill and must see me at once in case—in case the fever took a turn for the worse. You bade me trust Cordova, which I should have done in any case—then. I was to say nothing to any one, for fear of getting you into trouble—only to be at the railroad terminus yesterday morning, where he would meet me with horses. Of course now I understand." Her voice shook a little. "But at the moment, knowing nothing, suspecting nothing, thinking only of you lying here ill, I—I—— You must not blame me, Hugh, dear."

"I don't," grated her brother.

His eyes, blazing with hate and bitter, impotent fury, yet holding in their gray depths that haunting, repressed dread which had been there almost from the moment when his sister first entered the room, flashed toward the Mexican leaning tranquilly against the wall. Unmoved, Cordova languidly extracted the cigarette end from the amber holder and tossed it carelessly on the costly rug. Calmly he looked toward Cynthia.

"I should advise the señorita to persuade her brother to give up this farce," he suggested suavely, yet there was a note of cold menace in his smooth voice. "So far we have been very patient, Señor Ortiz and I, but there are limits. Unless the hiding place of the silver is soon revealed, we shall be forced——"

"Great Lord—man!" broke in Carstairs in a choking voice. He writhed in helpless fury, the stout cords straining across his chest and cutting into his muscular wrists. "Can't you see that I'm telling you the truth? How can I reveal something that doesn't exist—save in your imagination? Why, with that—that beast downstairs, I'd give up all the silver in the world. I'd sell my immortal soul for a chance to get her away from——" He broke off abruptly, veins standing out like cords on his forehead. "Listen, Cordova!" he went on rapidly in a different tone.

"I swear by all the saints that there *is* no buried silver. But give me a little time—give me a chance to write to De Valenzula, to my friends. They'll raise a ransom—anything you like to name. You can keep me here as hostage until it's paid. But for pity's sake, get Cynthia out of this—get her——"

His voice broke and trailed off into silence. There was no mercy, no slightest sign of yielding in the Mexican's cold, implacable eyes. Despairingly Carstairs' glance shifted to his sister, who was staring at him in wide-eyed, questioning horror.

"Ortiz?" she whispered. She moistened her dry lips. "You mean that Ramon Ortiz is here?"

Sick at heart he nodded without speaking. The girl, her face white, reached out and caught hold of one of the heavy curtains drawn across the long window behind her. She, too, had heard things of Ramon Ortiz, and for a moment she was overwhelmed by a spasm of pure terror. Then slowly the color flowed back into her face and with it courage—even if it was only the courage of despair.

"You—beast!" she cried, staring at Cordova with scorn and infinite loathing in her flashing eyes. "You—you coward! You, a Cordova, have done a thing the lowest dregs would shrink from. Why Manuel there would no more dream——"

She broke off with a sob of mingled anger and nervous terror, and her face grew white again. Cordova's lips curled in a smile which was not a pleasant thing to see.

"The señorita should not cloud her reason with vain anger," he murmured in his low, sinister voice. "The situation is clear; argument will accomplish nothing. General Ortiz waits below, and I am here. Much time already has been wasted. You have five minutes, no more, in which to come to a decision."

Five minutes! Like some helpless, hunted wild thing, Cynthia's despairing glance swept around the familiar room which in the old days had been Fernandez de Valenzula's study. She knew it well, just as she knew most of the other rooms and corridors of the rambling hacienda in which she had spent so many happy hours with Rita de Valenzula. And though the soul of it was gone, she found it otherwise but little changed. There was the same dark, carved furniture, the rich hangings, the picture of some ancient saint above the mantel, the stand of antique swords and rapiers clustering, fan-shaped, against the wall.

Five minutes—or less than five! She caught her breath, and her hunted glance swept past the negress standing across the room, to rest for an instant on the stolid face of Manuel who leaned upon his rifle near the curtained doorway leading to the stairs. There was no hope! He was Cordova's man, and in Cordova there was no atom of pity or compassion. The horror of it! To have demanded of one a thing impossible, or else to face——

Less than five minutes—much less! She dared not look at Hugh. She knew full well the tortures he was suffering for her. They were both quite helpless. Throughout this whole great rambling house there was not a soul to aid in their extremity.

Suddenly into her mind there flashed the memory of a man's face seen in the candlelight between meshed bars of iron. Thin and refined and strong it was—the strength of level brows, straight nose, and square, determined chin, with steady, reassuring eyes of brown, in which lurked a laughing, careless light that told of confidence and competence and courage. Often since the moment of his terrible plunging out of sight before her eyes she had thought of him and wondered. Mostly it was with a keen anxiety and fear for him.

At other times, selfishly, she told herself, she wished fervently that he could have been at hand to give her the helpful advice and aid she felt intuitively would be forthcoming. But never until this ghastly moment had she felt anything like the wave of sick, despairing longing for the physical presence of this almost stranger that surged over her now. And then of a sudden she thought she must be going mad.

Back of her the curtains swayed ever so slightly, and a man's fingers closed gently about the hand with which she still unconsciously gripped the heavy fabric. An instant later through the tiny slit between the hangings there came a whisper—the merest zephyr of a breath—so low that she could barely make out the words.

"Can you move aside a little bit, Miss Carstairs? I've lost my gun, and I've got to get that scoundrel on the jump."

CHAPTER XI.

BLAZE HOLDS THE STAIRS.

THROUGH the slit between the hangings Blaze saw the girl hesitate for a fraction of a second and then step behind her brother's chair, the carved back of which she gripped with nervous fingers. Her movement left clear a space of twelve or fourteen feet which separated the French windows from the spot where Cordova leaned negligently against the wall, just fitting another cigarette into his amber holder. Beyond him, some six feet, was a doorway leading, Blaze guessed, into a corridor or hall. Manuel, rifle slouchily trailing, stood close to it on the other side, and not far beyond him the negress, Mandy.

Calhoun had already sized up the situation through the narrow slit and made his plans. He would have two men to handle, but, knowing the sluggish temperament of the average peon and his inability to adjust himself swiftly to the unexpected, he had small fear of this one. Cordova carried no weapon, but might easily possess a hidden derringer or knife. Besides, thorough villain though he might be, he was of a different clay from the other Mexican and did not, Blaze felt assured, lack physical courage.

Eyes narrowed, muscles tensing, Calhoun gripped the edge of a curtain in each hand and slightly advanced one foot. For a tiny instant he waited until Cordova's match flared up. Then, tearing apart the hangings, he flung himself across the room, snatched the rifle from the startled Manuel, and, with the heavy weapon lifted in both hands, whirled upon the greater villain.

The latter's hand moved swiftly toward the inside of his coat, but he was not quite quick enough. Before he could more than draw the hidden weapon, the heavy rifle crashed down upon him. Instinctively he ducked and tried to slip aside. But, though the stock of the gun struck the wall and lessened a little the force of the terrific blow, it nevertheless felled him like a log. Without a sound he crumpled to the floor, a keen-edged glitering stiletto flying from his limp fingers.

With a yell Manuel leaped for the doorway, tore aside the curtain and disappeared, his pounding footfalls briefly audible upon the stairs. Face flaming and eyes ablaze with excitement, Hugh Carstairs strained frantically at his bonds.

"The knife, Cynthy—quick!" he cried. "Cut me loose."

Calhoun caught up the stiletto and, handing it to the girl, moved swiftly to the doorway, where he stood listening. Already he could hear the sounds of people stirring beyond the foot of the narrow stairs. A turmoil of voices, shrill and hoarse, grew swiftly louder. Down in those shadowy spaces lights flared and flickered.

It would take a little time, he knew,

to free the prisoner and get the two women down from the balcony. The door onto the narrow corridor and stairs had been removed, so there was no way of blocking by that means the approaching mob. But with the rifle——

But, as Calhoun caught hold of the breech and tried to work it, something stuck. Gripping it more firmly he exerted all his strength—to no avail. The mechanism was jammed, the weapon useless save as a club.

For a tiny space of time he stood motionless, head flung back, the old dare-devil look upon his face. Down below a multitude of footsteps were padding nearer; the sounds of harsh, angry voices swept up the narrow stairs and into the silent room. Cynthia, slashing feverishly at the rope which bound her brother, heard them and turned pale, her frightened eyes flashing toward Calhoun in piteous appeal.

He smiled back at her and, flinging aside the useless carbine, snatched from the stand of arms against the wall a long, slim Spanish rapier.

"The balcony," he said tersely, meeting Hugh Carstairs' glance. "Get down and through the garden and over the wall. I'll hold back the crowd until you're safe."

"But you?" cried Cynthia, as Hugh nodded understandingly. "What will become of you?"

"I'll be all right," he told her reassuringly. "Leave the window open and the curtains drawn back. When the time comes I'll make a rush—and this will help."

Springing toward the table on which stood a lighted lamp, he raised the rapier and with a single swinging stroke cut through fragile shade and glass chimney and plunged the room into instant darkness.

The picture he made in that instant, before the light went out, was stamped irrevocably on Cynthia Carstairs' memory. The tall, lithe figure with the upraised sword, every rippling muscle outlined beneath his clinging, rain-soaked garments, seemed the embodiment of strength and power and splendid vigor. His hat was gone, and his crisp brown hair, glistening with rain, rose in a ruffled crest above his keen, determined face. In his eyes, wide and sparkling, a dancing devil gleamed and flickered; his lips were set in a faint smile. When the sudden darkness blotted him from view, Cynthia was aware of a strange, unwonted, wholly unexpected thrill.

Outside the curtained doorway a straight, narrow corridor, perhaps a dozen feet in length, led to the head of a flight of stairs. As Calhoun reached it, he found the space below filled with scurrying figures. The gloom was brightened by many flickering lights which cast queer shadows on the harsh, hard faces. Already footfalls were padding on the bottom steps.

Gripping the point of the rapier, Blaze tested the steel, and, as the flexible blade bent into a glittering half circle, he laughed softly. To think of stumbling by the merest chance upon a priceless Toledo blade! Memories of those early student days at Vevay flashed over him, the fencing school, with the agile little French instructor, the bouts they had among themselves—bouts that were sometimes quaintly termed duels and fought with the buttons off the foils. He laughed again, and then abruptly his face hardened, and he jerked his body to one side, as a slim, lithe figure leaped like a panther to the landing and fired at him point-blank.

He had no chance to press the trigger a second time. Like a flash of light the rapier descended, striking the pistol from his hand to clatter on the stone floor of the corridor. Face alight, eyes gleaming brilliantly, Blaze stood before him, rapier point resting lightly on the floor.

"Well met—Ortiz!" he said composedly in Spanish. "You have a sword, man," he went on meaningly, as the Mexican still hesitated, half crouching at the head of the stairs. "Or is it worn merely for ornament like those pretty medals on your breast?"

With an oath Ortiz straightened and jerked the gold-hilted weapon from its scabbard. Eyes flashing, he flung himself forward, and, as their blades clashed, Blaze knew suddenly that he had met a master of a dying art.

With a wrist of steel, yet supple and pliable as the blade he weilded; a lithe, agile body, all muscle strung on steel wire, Ramon Ortiz made an almost perfect swordsman. Under his skillful hand the glittering sword point became a thing alive, a swiftly moving, ever-quivering spark of flame. Thrusting, parrying, darting forward, leaping back with an agility which showed no trace of the potions he had been imbibing all the evening, there were moments when he pressed his opponent hard.

But Calhoun, besides having a very pretty skill himself as a fencer, was possessed of several distinct advantages. The light was in his favor, his rapier a good six inches longer than his opponent's weapon, and he fought with a cool head, a gay abandon, with ever in his mind a vision of gray eyes under a shadowing of disordered golden hair which held in them appeal and trust and confidence. Finally he did not fight to kill, like Ortiz, but merely to gain time.

It was a strange picture, that. The flaring lights, casting strange shadows on the white walls and heavy, carven woodwork, the huddled, silent throng below, staring breathlessly with upturned faces, the flash of steel, the click and clash of darting blades, the pad of feet, the lunging of lithe bodies—all these combined to make a scene which might have been plucked bodily out of the romantic, long-dead past.

One might well have expected the crash of rifle or of pistol fired from the crowd below to break the glamor of that strange struggle. This possibility, indeed, lurked in the back of Calhoun's mind and made him constantly endeavor to keep Ortiz in such a position that his men would not dare to shoot for fear of hitting their leader.

And so the minutes passed—swiftly or slowly Blaze did not know. He was filled with a keen, fierce exultation. The grate and clatter of the clinking blades was like music in his ears. An eager, reckless light danced in his eyes. His slightly parted lips curved in a faint smile.

The face of Ramon Ortiz was set in a black scowl, and his breathing grew steadily more labored. That first, fierce spurt of nervous energy spent, a life of ease and dissipation had begun to tell. His wrist grew weary, his forward lunges lacked the supple, pantherish litheness they had shown at first. His defense became slower and more labored. Twice Calhoun could have run him through, but held his hand, knowing that if their leader fell the mob would instantly rush the stairs. That moment must come soon, Blaze knew, but he did not mean to hasten it when every minute gained was precious.

He was beginning to think that the end could not be long delayed, when suddenly from behind him he heard Hugh Carstairs' voice.

"We've found another way out—a backstairs leading from the room in here. Cynthia's gone on with Mandy. Finish the brute quickly, if you can, and then jump back here."

Blaze nodded briefly, his eyes narrowed, watching for his chance. A sudden rush forced Ortiz back a pace or two. There was a swift play of circling blades, a clever feint, a quick forward lunge under the Mexican's guard, which drove the rapier through the fellow's shoulder and forced a

snarling oath of pain and fury from his lips.

Flinging out both hands he staggered back, one heel catching on the upper step. His sword, loosed by limp fingers, flew over the railing, a glittering arc of light. An instant later Ortiz himself, with another involuntary cry, plunged backward down the stairs and out of sight.

CHAPTER XII.

FLIGHT.

THE angry roar of the mob ringing in his ears, Calhoun bent swiftly and, snatching up the revolver lying at his feet, leaped back into the darkened room. The crack of rifles and revolvers added to the din, and several bullets plowed into the casing or whined through the doorway to bury themselves in the further wall. But to these Blaze paid no heed.

"This way," said Carstairs, catching him by an arm.

He held a small electric torch and, switching it on, led the way hastily to a door set in the wall back of the chair in which he had been held a prisoner. Pushing Blaze before him, Carstairs turned and, slamming the heavy oaken portal, hastily turned the key, which he had previously removed from the inner side.

"They're down below," he said, flashing the light on a flight of steep and narrow stairs. "There's a door leading into the gardens."

Without comment Calhoun ran down the steps. At the bottom was a little square vestibule from which a door led out into the night. It stood ajar, and just outside were Cynthia and Mandy. The negress regarded the blade gripped in Blaze's right hand with rolling eyes, her ample bosom heaving with excitement. Cynthia turned toward him, and, as their glances met, Blaze caught his breath at the momentary, fleeting expression he caught there. It was enough to make a man gasp, even though it was gone an instant later, and all the time he knew that what he read —or seemed to read—was merely the product of gratitude working on nerves strained to the breaking point.

"It was mighty decent of you to wait," he said, as he stood beside her. "But that wall's going to be some job to climb, and those devils will be pouring out here in two shakes."

"We won't have to climb it," put in Carstairs, as he closed the door and joined them. "There's a little gate. This way, isn't it, Cynthy?"

"Yes, to the right." Her voice was admirably steady and composed. "A path leads through the rose garden. You go ahead with the light, Hugh."

The storm had lessened, and, though the wind still blew fitfully, the lashing rain had turned to a gentle drizzle. Almost at once the little stone-flagged path plunged into a mass of shrubbery which at the slightest touch scattered over them a drenching shower. Once or twice, in spite of its evident futility, Calhoun tried to hold back the branches from the girl who walked in front of him, but she soon checked him with low-voiced insistence.

"Don't trouble, please," she said. "I'm wet through already, and anyway it doesn't matter—nothing matters now."

Hurrying on they crossed an overgrown rose garden, wild, tangled, and full of alien plants, but still pouring forth its fragrance in waves of perfume. Stone seats were scattered about in little coverts, and here and there the vague outlines of a marble statue gleamed through the darkness.

To Calhoun there was a curious atmosphere of unreality about it all. Whimsically he likened this to a garden of enchantment, remote and peaceful, through whose dusky silences they hastened. Peril and hazard seemed very

far away; and yet that other practical side of him knew only too well that they were flying from what was worse than death. When at length they gained a little hidden postern gate set in the rear wall and passed through into the forest, he breathed a faint sigh of relief.

"What now?" asked Carstairs, glancing at Calhoun. "I haven't recovered yet from the shock of seeing you jump through that window in the nick of time. You're the original wonder boy, and I fully expect you to produce an airplane to make our get-away in. Of course," he added whimsically, "a bunch of good swift horses might do at a pinch."

He spoke lightly, but in his pleasant voice and in the glance he bent on Cynthia was an undercurrent of racking anxiety. Blaze promptly played up to him.

"Sorry, but I left the airplane at home," he returned, smiling. "But, as I came around this way, I noticed a likely lot of horses in that corral outside the walls. They're saddles, too, lying about, and not more than half a dozen fellows to look after them. I think we'd better get after them, don't you?"

"I'll say so! Come along, Mandy. You take my sister, and hang onto that sword, old man. We may need it in our business, seeing as we're minus guns."

"I've got Ramon's," Blaze told him, "though I'm afraid we won't be able to find any shells to fit it. The one I lost was an automatic."

"Good business. At least there are six shots in it, which is a whole lot better than nothing. Well, let's go."

Keeping close to the wall they sped on as fast as the darkness and the rough ground permitted. So far no signs of pursuit had come to them, but Calhoun had no hope that it would be abandoned. Even with Ortiz *hors de combat* his followers would take up the chase, if only to curry favor with the all-powerful dictator. They might waste a little time picking up the trail, but sooner or later they would be baying at the heels of the fugitives, like a pack of hounds.

Cynthia held Calhoun's arm, but there was little conversation. She made no mention of the ordeal through which she had passed; somehow Blaze knew she couldn't bring herself to speak of it. Nor did she try in so many words to thank him, for which he was devoutly grateful. Already she had done that and more with her expressive eyes. Once only, when they were nearing the end of the long stretch of wall, did she refer to the past.

"I've often thought of you and wondered," she said suddenly in a low tone. "Last night, you know—it seemed so terrible your dropping out of sight that way, and then—the silence. I wanted desperately to try and help, but there seemed no way. Did—did you find the note I dropped into that black hole?"

"Of course. That was partly what made me follow you."

Briefly he told her what had happened, finding it a little difficult to express in words the motive which had drawn him irresistibly after her. She heard him to the end, but made no comment. Only her breath quickened, and then abruptly they turned the corner of the wall and saw the bars of the corral looming out of the darkness ahead.

A little reconnoitering disclosed the stable building dark and quiet. It looked as if the hostlers still slept peacefully in blissful ignorance of the turmoil which had rent the hacienda from top to bottom. Considering the comparative distance of the great house, the storm, the high wall and muffling trees and shrubbery, no less than the stolid temperament of their class, this was not, perhaps, to be wondered at.

Certainly it was extraordinarily fortuitous, and the two men lost not an instant in taking advantage of their good luck. Blaze found a rope and entered the corral to catch up three horses, in which Hugh aided him by turning the flash light through the bars. Two were roped with comparative ease and swiftly saddled and bridled by Carstairs and his sister. By this time, however, the animals were thoroughly aroused and frightened by the unusual conditions, and Mandy, who had been handed the pocket flash, was rather unskillful in its manipulation. It took Calhoun a good five minutes to drop the loop over the neck of a rawboned sorrel, and, just as he was leading him toward the gate, there came a faint, distant crashing in the undergrowth, accompanied by the muffled rise and fall of many voices.

"They're coming," he said briefly, as he dragged the sorrel through the gate. "I wish you people would lead the horses on into the woods and leave me to get my own mount."

"No!" protested Cynthia swiftly, before her brother had time to speak. "We'll stick together, won't we, Hugh?"

"Of course!" agreed Carstairs, flinging on the saddle. "We'll have this done in a jiffy, and then—— What in thunder does that mean?"

A rifle shot cut through the stillness of the night, followed by another, and then several crashed out together. They came from the woods back of the rear wall. The sounds of hurried footfalls and the clamor of voices grew louder and more distinct, and suddenly in the near-by building a light sprang up.

Calhoun swore under his breath. "They're signaling," he said briefly. "They guess we're making for the pass and want these fellows to cut us off. Get into the woods—quick," he urged. "My horse is near here."

With a grumble Carstairs yielded and, leading the horses, hustled his sister and the negress toward the near-by trees. Blaze secured Blueskin, but, before he could gain the cover of the woods, the stable door was flung open, and several dark figures ran out, perceived him moving through the shadows, and set up a concerted yell.

Jerking out the gold-mounted revolver which had belonged to Ramon Ortiz, Blaze fired toward the group. He did not aim to hit, knowing that at the shot the peons would duck back into the house, like frightened rabbits. But, though they did exactly as he expected, the damage was already done. They might be too cowardly to take up the pursuit themselves, but when the larger force came up they would be in a position to point out accurately the direction the fugitives had taken.

As Blaze considered what this meant, reviewed the difficulties of the trail, the many weary miles which lay between them and safety, his face hardened, and his eyes grew somber.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DESPERATE CHANCE.

DAWN found the little party toiling through the hills close to the border line. Cynthia was white and hollow-eyed with weariness and strain, the negress in little better state. Hugh was the freshest of them all, for his strength had not been sapped by incessant riding, the strain of fighting, or the lack of sleep.

The condition of the horses was even worse. They were of the small, wiry Mexican breed, akin to cow ponies, good for short jaunts, but having no great store of real endurance. Two of them at least had evidently been worked hard the day before, and, with the added grilling of these many miles, had almost reached the point of collapse. The third was slightly fresher, but even

he was plainly not good for many miles more. Only the roan, Blueskin, on whom Cynthia was mounted, though sweat-lathered and breathing hard, could be depended on. Thoroughbred that he was, he would run until he dropped, keeping up his long, swinging stride to the very end.

For a long time they had plodded on in silence, broken only by subdued moans from Mandy, who was saddle-galled and fairly reeling with fatigue. One other sound rose on the still, clear air—the ominous drum of thudding hoofs which swept after them from the trail behind. For a long time they had been conscious of it, always a little nearer, a little more distinct. Presently at the summit of a rise, Carstairs turned in his saddle to look back, as he had done so many times before, and his face darkened. Sweeping over a ridge less than a mile behind surged a long line of dark, moving figures that seemed endless. Swiftly Hugh's glance swept to Calhoun to meet the latter's steady, significant regard.

"We've got to face it," said Blaze quietly. "These nags may drop in their tracks any time. At best they won't carry us more than three or four miles further. The roan," he added meaningly, "will last twenty."

Cynthia, who heard him, turned abruptly in her saddle to surprise a glance of understanding passing between the two men.

"No!" she cried a little incoherently, a rush of color tinging her pale face. "I won't—I can't! It isn't fair of you to ask——"

"You couldn't do any good staying," cut in her brother. "Much better for one of us to get away than——"

"But can't you see how I'd feel leaving you to face that mob without me?" She caught her breath in a hard, stifled sob. "All my life I'd hate myself—I couldn't beat it, Hugh. I'd rather——"

"I wasn't thinking of asking you to be a deserter," said Calhoun, as she paused, lips quivering. "I've got a sort of plan. It may seem wild and impossible, but just now we're not in a position to pick and choose. You remember the road house, Carstairs—the House of the Wolf, they call it?"

"Of course! The place where Cynthy stopped two nights ago. I've passed it several times, a tumble-down, secret-looking building, with a rotten reputation. It can't be very far ahead."

"Not more than three miles. It's just across the border, and I've a notion these horses are good for about that and no more. Those fellows aren't going to balk at a little thing like crossing the line, especially when there's nobody to stop them. We're sure to be overtaken thereabouts, and my idea is to rush the place, intrench ourselves there and make a fight. The walls are thick, the windows barred, and the door is solid oak."

"How many men are there?" asked Carstairs with sudden eagerness.

"Four. This Garcia is the king-pin, and if we down him at once the others won't give us any trouble. We've got a revolver with five shots in it—and the sword." He smiled a little, as he touched the hilt of the rapier which was thrust into his belt. "If we can't handle four greasers with that armament we're pretty poor stuff. Of course, once inside the building, we'll have our pick of weapons."

A look of grim satisfaction came into Carstairs' face. "Good stuff," he commented. "We'll give 'em something to remember us by. Of course in the end——"

"Ah!" cut in Blaze, his smile deepening. "You haven't heard the cream of my plan yet. While we hold the fort, Miss Carstairs will hustle over to the post at Larcom for help. It's quite a ride, and I don't know the road except that it leads off southeast from Charvas and curves around back of these hills.

But there must be some way of cutting across country that will save time."

"Man! Man!" cried Carstairs, his eyes suddenly sparkling with excitement. "There is! I must have been wool-gathering not to have thought of this before. There's a short cut through the hills that comes out on this very trail, not more than a couple of miles ahead. I've ridden it a dozen times."

"How far——"

"Not more than twelve or fourteen miles."

"Too much for us," said Blaze. "But the roan can make it easily. If the commandant's the right sort he'll send out a detachment on the jump, and——"

"He is," interrupted Carstairs. "George Stanwood is a mighty good chap. I expect he'd come himself. Can't we push the beasts a bit? That bunch sounds mighty close, and we haven't any time to waste."

But the spent animals refused to respond to gentle urging, and they were afraid to press them. Slowly a mile or more passed, the sounds of pursuit growing ominously clearer. Hugh rode beside his sister, carefully describing the route that she must take. Blaze brought up the rear, outwardly calm, but growing more and more anxious, as he listened to the increasing clamor in the rear. When at last the others drew rein at the entrance of a shallow gully, he gave a gentle sigh of relief.

Cynthia's farewells were brief, for she was quite aware of the necessity of getting out of sight of the trail quickly. She gave her brother a single embrace and then her eyes fell upon the face of the negress.

"I couldn't take Mandy with me just a little way?" she swiftly questioned. "She could turn off into some gulch and hide, if she couldn't keep——"

"No, honey," cut in the negress decidedly. "Ah'd only hamper yo', chile, an', 'sides, Ah's mos' dead ridin' on dis hyer contraption. Ah'll stay wif Marse Hugh, an' mebbe Ah'll get a chance to bash some o' dis hyer mis'able yallar trash that's makin' us so much trubble."

Hastily the girl turned to Blaze and held out her hand. "Good-by," she said unsteadily, "I—I——"

Her voice faltered, but her eyes were eloquent. There was a fleeting touch of tenderness in Calhoun's smile.

"It's coming out all right," he told her confidently. "You mustn't worry about us. At the worst we can take refuge in that underground tunnel. We'll look for reinforcements in three hours or less. You'll have to hurry now. But once out of sight of the trail, you'd better walk the roan a bit so they won't hear you. Good-by."

Swiftly she turned her horse and rode into the gully. Part way along it, she twisted in the saddle and flung up one arm in a gesture of farewell. The two men answered it and then urged their horses forward.

"You seem pretty confident, old man," Carstairs remarked presently. "Do you really believe we can put this thing across?"

Calhoun glanced at him with a slow smile. "We'll make a mighty good stab at it, though of course a lot depends on luck. But no matter what happens, *she's* out of it."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAN AT THE FORK.

BACK in the gully Cynthia gave the roan his head, though she was ready at any moment to tighten on the reins, if the narrow, rough track took a difficult turn. Even now, though the plan she was helping to carry out seemed reasonable—in as much as anything so hazardous could be said to possess reason—she wondered whether the chief object of it hadn't, after all, been to get her safely out of danger. She had an

innate horror of anything that savored of "quitting," and it had cut her to the heart to leave the two men back there to face the peril in which she felt somehow she ought to have shared. Her brother she loved devotedly. The other——

A flush crept into her face, and her long lashes drooped. She understood quite well the meaning of that sweetly bitter pang which had made the parting doubly hard. Until that glimpse of it between those iron bars she had never seen his face before. And yet in her heart she knew that if she was never again to look into those laughing, sparkling eyes, life would become to her a thing of dregs and desolation.

Suddenly her hand tightened on the reins, and she drew the roan abruptly to a halt. The track had left the gully and was curving over a rocky slope scattered with clumps of tenacious firs, with here and there a gaunt, grotesque cactus rising straight and motionless toward the tender azure sky. As she listened, pale-faced, eyes filled with questioning suspense, the clatter of hoofs swelled to a muffled drum which meant that the Mexicans were sweeping past the gully along the trail below. The turmoil subsided slowly, with many recurrences, as belated riders followed the main body. Then all at once a single faint pistol shot wafted to her from the north made Cynthia catch her breath. Was it her friends attacking the road house? That must be it. Scarcely daring to breath, she sat motionless, listening intently. But no other report followed, and at length she sent her horse onward.

At first she kept him to a walk, but, feeling as she did that every instant was precious, she could not bring herself to dawdle in this fashion, even if it were more prudent. What had she to do with prudence, when the lives of those two back there were at stake? Almost before she realized it, she had loosened the reins and was urging the animal to greater speed. The faint sound of rifle shots far in the rear only added to her frantic desire to hurry.

Fortunately she understood horses. Her task, she knew, was to hold him back at intervals rather than to apply the spur.

Under her skillful management he did his gallant best, but she soon recognized the flagging energy of a horse that is spent. His spirit never failed, but his spurts of speed grew briefer; the intervals between lengthened. Cynthia knew that he was doing his best—that if she laxed her hold upon the reins he would keep running till he dropped. And yet, racked as she was with terror and foreboding, it needed much self-restraint to refrain from letting him speed on, even though in her heart she knew this would be worse than futile.

In this wise, with alternate bursts of speed and lagging, Cynthia followed the twisting intricacies of the rough trail. Sometimes scarcely visible, again broad and plain enough, the trail ribboned through the desolate, empty, hilly country, always following the line of least resistance.

More than once the girl had a sudden sinking conviction that she had lost her way. But inevitably the narrow track reappeared until at last, just beyond the entrance to a shallow gulch, it forked abruptly.

Cynthia pulled up, her eyes brightening. Hugh had told her of this fork and cautioned her to take the left-hand branch. The other, she remembered, twisted off southward through hills and mountains. It was the way, indeed, by which those muleteers over a year ago had brought their secret loads of silver ingots unseen from San Jago to the States.

"Larcom can't be much farther now," she murmured.

Not more than a hundred yards be-

yond the fork the trail took a sudden twist around a clump of cottonwoods. The sight of those water-loving trees and the pricking ears of Blueskin made her wonder if there could be a spring back of them. A drink would do wonders for the horse, and at once Cynthia turned him thither. An instant later she caught her breath sharply and stared wide-eyed with blanching face at the man standing beside a dun-colored cayuse, who barred the way.

He seemed quite as surprised as she, and, being somewhat slow to recover himself, Cynthia had a brief chance in which to collect her wits. Swarthy, broad-faced, with black eyes that peered intently at her from under the huge brim of his hat, there was a teasing familiarity about the fellow which Cynthia could not account for until suddenly he spoke.

"Gracias dias, señorita," he growled curtly, his eyes, filled with mingled surprise and curiosity, fixed upon her face. "Yo' hurry—yes?"

Cynthia moistened her dry lips and gripped the reins with unconscious force. It was Juan, the Mexican who had cooked and served their supper in that horrible room at the road house two nights before. What to do or say? She must act instantly—must strive somehow to still the suspicions she felt rising in his swarthy face. With a supreme effort of will she stilled her quivering nerves and smiled.

"Gracias dias," she murmured in reply. "It quite startled me to come upon you so unexpectedly. You see I haven't met a soul since—since I parted with—Señor Cordova."

"Yes? The señorita, she go where?"

He paused expectantly, his searching gaze still fixed intently on her face.

"Home," she returned calmly. "Our business, you see, is finished, and I am returning home, first stopping for a day to visit friends in Larcom. This *is* the right way to Larcom, isn't it?"

He did not answer, but continued to stare at her with some perplexity. "An' Señor Cordova?" he questioned presently.

Her eyebrows lifted. "Señor Cordova?" she repeated. "Why, he is back there—at the road house. He has affairs with Garcia."

With what an effort she forced that look of mild surprise, that tone of casual calmness, no one would ever know. Nor did she hesitate or quibble at the lies. She was fighting desperately not only for her own freedom, but even more for two precious lives, and against that, what mattered truth, or falsehood, or anything on earth?

Suddenly she knew that her fight had been of no avail. The Mexican was staring at the roan, and in his face she read recognition of the horse and mounting suspicion. Hastily she made a desperate effort to distract his attention

"Is—is there a spring back there?" she asked a little breathlessly. "I thought I heard it running. I'm very thirsty."

His expression told her that she had failed completely. Suspicion flamed in the black eyes that regarded her across the empty saddle of the dun—suspicion and a slowly rising look of stubborn determination. He meant to stop her going on—might even force her to ride back with him—to what?

Terror seared through her soul, and her mind flashed swiftly back to that sinister adobe house, behind whose walls the two human beings she cared for most in all the world were holding off a murderous mob. Suppose she was brought before them in the power of the besieging Mexicans! It would be the horror of the hacienda all over again, but worse. They would bargain her life for theirs. She could not bear it—she would not!

That was what cut through her like a knife, rousing her courage and de-

termination to a white heat, sharpening her wits. She must escape to bring that promised help—she must! And yet if she tried to fly, he would catch her with his fresher horse. Her gaze, fixed on the Mexican's sallow face, hardened, flashed for an instant over the dun horse standing close to her and less than a length ahead, and suddenly she saw a way.

Pausing only to draw a swift breath, she sharply spurred the roan, that leaped forward with a startled snort. As she swept past the dun, her outstretched hand clutched and held the trailing bridle reins. For a ghastly moment she thought she was going to be dragged out of the saddle. But, catching the horn with her right hand and gripping with her knees, she managed to retain her seat and, still urging the roan, galloped on down the trail, dragging the dun with her.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAST CARD.

AN angry yell, twice repeated, only spurred her on. Not more than a score of yards ahead the trail curved sharply around a massive pile of rocks. If only she could reach that bend!

Suddenly a pistol spat, and she heard the whine of a bullet close to her head. Cynthia had a feeling that the Mexican had purposely shot wild to frighten her, and, with a curiously impersonal coolness, she wondered where the next one would strike. As she sent Blueskin flying around the rocky buttress, a bullet splintered the shale beside her so close that a sharp fragment bit into her arm with painful force.

"He meant to hit the horse," she found herself panting aloud. "Oh, hurry—hurry!" She gave the animal a single lash with the quirt she had snatched from the saddle horn. "Don't you know that unless we get around that next turn before he comes in sight, we're done for?"

His panting snort, the sight of his laboring, sweat-lathered sides, brought a tremor to the lips which until this moment had kept their firmness. "I don't *mean* to be cruel," she went on with a stifled sob. "It's only that you *must* keep going."

The dun, abandoning a futile attempt to balk, clattered along behind her. Cynthia had twisted the bridle around her wrist and, despite the pain of leather cutting against the tender flesh, she held it unflinchingly. She did not dare look back. Her very soul in her eyes, she kept her gaze set on a mass of firs that marked the second sharp twist in the trail. When at length the gallant roan stumbled, panting, into safety, the girl slumped forward in her seat and began to sob softly.

It was only the inevitable snapping of taut nerves, and a moment or two later she was pulling herself together. Shaking the tears from her eyes, with a determined movement of her head, she bent forward and touched Blueskin's neck caressingly with the hand that held the bridle.

"You poor darling!" she murmured unsteadily. "Just a tiny minute more of rest, and then we must go on again."

For about two miles farther she kept her hold on the dun's bridle. Then, noticing that his stubborn dragging back was only making it harder for Blueskin, she untwisted the reins and let them drop.

The Mexican's horse took a few short strides after her and then stopped. Glancing back, Cynthia saw him standing motionless in the middle of the trail, the long, gaunt face turned inquiringly in her direction. When another bend took them presently out of sight, he was still standing undecided, and the girl drew a long breath of relief. Barring accidents or obstacles entirely unforseen, she felt herself free from any further interference on the part of Garcia's henchman.

Happily no fresh difficulties turned up to delay her progress. To be sure the way seemed endless, and she was tortured by a constant fear that the exhausted horse would collapse under her. But at length, riding out of a thicket which lay along the bottom of a long, forest-covered slope, the whole, broad, sweeping level of Larcom basin spread out before her.

How long it was since she had left the Charvas trail she had no notion. It seemed interminable hours, though the sun had not yet climbed into the zenith. Striving to keep a hold upon her tattered nerves, to lift herself by sheer force of will out of that abyss of utter exhaustion which seemed to drag her down, she urged the exhausted roan on toward the dotting buildings and corrals which loomed so far away. If only some one would see her and ride out to meet her and carry back the news.

But no one did. Cynthia failed to meet a single soul until the roan, foam-flecked, sides heaving, flaming nostrils diliated, stumbled around the corner of a long, low barracks, staggered across the level parade ground and halted, quivering, not far from a slim, trim figure in natty white standing near a spreading, vine-wreathed bungalow, talking with his aid.

Cynthia threw the reins over the horses's head and flung herself from the saddle. Her knees were weak and shaking, but she managed to keep a hold on herself and stumbled toward the two men. Both men turned hastily and ran to meet her.

"Miss Carstairs!" gasped the major, catching her hands in his. "What is it? What has happened?"

At the touch of his firm strong fingers, the girl's strength seemed momentarily to leave her. She had a horrible feeling that she was going to collapse before she had time to tell her story.

"I—won't!" she mumbled, white teeth digging cruelly into her under lip. "I can't! I——"

"My dear young lady!" soothed the officer, venturing to slip a supporting arm around her slender, drooping figure. "Let me help you to the veranda. Water, Denny! And get my wife."

There followed a blurred, hazy sense of stir and movement. Cynthia felt herself half helped, half carried to the shady porch and let down gently into a deep wicker chair. But even before the tumbler of water reached her, she had forced herself back to complete consciousness.

"Hugh——" she panted. "He and Blaze Calhoun are besieged by Mexicans in that road house—on the Charvas trail. They chased us all the way—from San Jago. The horses gave out, and I—came on—alone. He wants you—to come. I was held up by—a Mexican, and——"

Major Standwood took the glass from the younger man and held it steadily to her lips.

"Sound the assembly, Denny," he ordered swiftly. "How many Mexicans?" he asked the girl.

"I'm not sure. Forty or fifty at least."

"Half a company then, Denny. Have them saddle up and form on the parade ground. I'll ride my bay. And make it snappy. Ah, Lydia! Here's poor Miss Carstairs in a frightful state. See to her, my dear, while I get ready."

With a flutter of white muslin Lydia Standwood flew across the veranda and bent over her friend.

"Cynthia!" she cried, as she caught sight of the girl's face. "You're ill! You're suffering. Let me take you inside and——"

"Not yet, Lydia," cut in the girl. "I want to see them start. I must——" She caught sight of the weary, drooping roan out in the hot sunshine and gave a little contrite cry. "Oh, the poor

darling! He's been too utterly wonderful and run himself almost to death. Couldn't some one——"

Some one did—promptly. The major's wife, though young and charming, had caught some of the official manner from her husband, and much to his disgust a passing orderly quite unexpectedly found himself doing a hostler's duty.

As the lifting notes of the bugle rose on the still, clear air, Cynthia's eyes brightened and the succeeding sights and sounds of bustle and activity were balm to her weary, troubled spirit. Presently the major, ready for the saddle, clanked out and paused to give her a word of cheer.

"You mustn't fret," he said. "We'll have them back here in no time at all."

Cynthia watched the troops form up and heard the brief commands. She even managed to raise herself in the chair a little, as the orderly formations shot forward, swept around the barracks, and on across the broad, level basin. For a moment or two her wistful, weary, tragic eyes followed the dust cloud of their passing. Then suddenly her head fell back against the wicker, her eyes closed, and two tears forced themselves between her thick lashes and rolled down her pallid, haggard face.

CHAPTER XVI.

CYNTHIA PICKS A MAN.

ON a deep sofa in the cool living room Cynthia tossed restlessly, watching the shadows lengthen across the parade ground. She had bathed, rested—as much as her troubled spirit could be said to rest—and now, clad in a filmy tea gown of Mrs. Standwood's, she was waiting, her mind tortured by anxiety and suspense and a growing sense of dire foreboding. How did she know that they had ever gained possession of the road house? Or, if they had, might not the Mexicans have forced it before the troops arrived? Her hand clenched, then opened, and her fingers plucked nervously at the tufting of the sofa.

"It's long past the time, Lydia," she said at length, unable to bear with her thoughts another instant. "I'm awfully afraid something has happened."

Mrs. Standwood got up and crossed to one of the end windows. "Nonsense," she soothed. "You're fretting yourself quite needlessly, dear."

"But they ought to have got back ages ago," persisted Cynthia.

"Not ages, darling. I was talking to one of the sergeants just now, and he says that by riding hard they might possibly have made it half an hour ago. They're not pressing the horses, that's all. I'm sure at any moment—— There! I knew it!"

"What?" cried Cynthia, starting up.

"Dust. They're just leaving the trail and forming up out on the flats. I'm so thankful, darling. I know it's been a perfectly beastly time for you, but it's all over now. Come to the window, and you can see them."

But Cynthia, though her eyes quieted a little, and some of the strain faded from her face, was still haunted by nervous fears. The troopers might be returning, but had they been successful? Had they arrived in time, and were they bringing back those two alive and well?

"You tell me, dear," she said, her head falling back on the cushion. "I won't go out until I know."

Pretty Mrs. Standwood moved over to the front window and became an animated bulletin. Now the soldiers were crossing the flats, presently they reached the outposts, and at last they were circilng the barracks and moving onto the wide parade ground.

Suddenly she gave a little cry. "I knew they'd come through all right, darling! There's a man in civilians riding beside George."

One! Cynthia caught her breath. Which—one? A sharp pang shot through her, and she closed her eyes. How would she choose between them—if she had to choose. At this harrowing moment she did not know!

"There's a Mexican woman," commented Mrs. Standwood in a puzzled tone. "No, a negress. She looks all in, poor thing. Of course that's——"

"Mandy," broke in Cynthia in a dry, hard voice.

Her brilliant, feverish gaze was fixed intently on Lydia's pink, pretty, placid face. Why didn't she speak? Where was the other? Couldn't she *feel* the torturing anxiety that was racking her? To Cynthia it seemed as if the strength of her emotion must stir the air like something tangible.

"There!" cried Lydia, as if in answer to her thoughts. "I see him now. He's riding on the other side with Denny. Now they've left the troops and are coming this way." She turned from the window. "You must meet him at the door, darling."

A little shaky, Cynthia stood up and took a step forward. "Which one is coming?" she asked slowly.

"Both of them. But Hugh is first, of course. He always was a perfect darling of a brother. Poor lamb! You're shaking like a leaf, and no wonder after all you've been through. Let me help you."

But suddenly Cynthia knew she needed no assistance. As she heard that swift tread crossing the veranda floor, her eyes grew brilliant, her slim figure straightened, and she flew across the room to fling herself upon the tall, lithe figure that paused momentarily in the doorway, eyes dimmed with happy tears.

"Hugh—oh, Hugh, darling!" she cried. "I——"

The words died on her lips, and she caught her breath. The eyes which looked down into hers were brown, not gray—brown, with a gay, dancing, eager light lurking in their clear depths. The ruffled hair was brown, not blond. The arms which had gone about her with such instinctive naturalness were partly covered by tattered white—not the khaki Hugh had worn.

But, though the color flamed into Cynthia's face, she made no effort to release herself from that strange embrace, as she supposed any well-brought up, right-minded girl would instantly have done. On the contrary she did not stir. Somehow she could not. Her thick lashes drooped, fluttered, then lifted, and she bravely returned the other's steady glance.

Tender, whimsical, the brown eyes questioned, with the eager, fainly wistful undercurrent of one who longs, but is far from sure. And, as the gray eyes answered, the arms thrusting from ragged remnants of once-white sleeves, tightened swiftly about the slender shoulders.

For a long moment the silence was unbroken. Motionless beside the sofa, immensely intrigued by the unexpected romance developing under her very nose, Mrs. Stanwood watched the two, with sparkling eyes. Suddenly another step sounded on the veranda, and Hugh Carstairs' voice, hearty, jubiliant, abruptly broke the spell.

"Where are you, Cynthy? I waited to see to Mandy. I told you we'd pull through all right. You ought to have seen that bunch of Mexicans scatter when Stanny's men—— Well, I'll be hanged!"

Cheeks deeply pink, eyes brilliant, Cynthia disengaged herself and embraced her brother warmly. But, when she had kissed him, she caught the laughing twinkle in his eyes and suddenly buried her hot face against his shoulder.

"Some speed, Cynthia," he murmured in her ear. "I'll say this for you, though, sis—you've sure picked a man."

"Why, Father!"

By Frank Richardson Pierce

Author of "A Bead on Old Betsy," "When the Ice Went Out," etc.

FATHER! Oh, father! Now where's he gone? He shouldn't be out on a day like this without being well bundled up. Father!" This last was short and impatient. Young Mrs. Knox stood on the back porch with an old overcoat over her arm, peering about. Street cars rumbled by a block away, and automobiles moved swiftly to and fro, those westbound carrying the dust of the desert on their camping equipment and tops. "Oh, father!"

"Father," at that moment was sitting beneath the porch, and he wasn't batting an eye, though he had heard his daughter-in-law's call the first time. He had tucked his pipe hastily into his pocket lest the smoke drift up and betray his hiding place. His eyes twinkled merrily, like a schoolboy engaged in mischief.

"That man will be the death of me yet!" Then, with a final "Father!" she reëntered the house. "Hard" Knox chuckled.

"That girl will kill me with kindness yet," he mused. "Why, bless her, I'd taken care of myself more'n forty years before she was born, and I'm still doing right well. On a day like this it feels good to have the wind whipping around. Reminds me of my younger days." He stopped mumbling suddenly and cocked an alert ear to catch his daughter-in-law's words. She was talking to a neighbor.

"He's doubtless telling some one about his younger days, when he was the best cross-arm man in the country and rounded up the King gang." From Mrs. Knox's tone it was evident she was exceedingly skeptical about the old man's go-getting accomplishments.

"I suppose," came from the other woman, "he's told those stories so many times that by now he believes them himself. He is such a nice old man, though, it is difficult to believe he would intentionally prevaricate. Still, he's done some whopping things in his time, according to his story."

"And he tells them with such offhand modesty, too," put in the daughter. "Just like I'd say, 'I was going down the street and turned my ankle.' "

"I remember the time he said, 'King and Murray went for their guns the same time I did, but I got 'em both!' Now you can't make me believe one man could kill two men before they could kill him. Why, in those days they didn't even have automatic pistols, just old forty-fours, and——"

At the mention of automatic pistols the old man's tilted chair came down with a bang. "Darn!" he said growl-

ingly. "How many times have I got to tell 'em an automatic pistol ain't in it with a forty-four? And, besides, they jam, and then where are you?" He answered the question himself. "On the ground kicking your last, while the man with the forty-four is putting his guns away."

Figuratively and literally old Hard Knox was smoking as he entered the house. "Oh, here you are, father, you mustn't go out without your overcoat this kind of weather."

"This ain't overcoat weather, Edna, and if you keep at me the first thing I'll know I'll be getting old. I ain't reached the bundling-up age yet." Edna glanced up at the other woman as if to say, "One foot is in the grave, and the bank is caving beneath the other foot," but he doesn't seem to realize it.

"I came up to tell you, Mrs. David, that I can put a gun full of bullets into a target with my forty-four quicker than any son of a gun can with an automatic, and I'll do either plain or fancy shootin'. And don't look at me that way; when people look at me like that I know they're thinking, 'he's a childish old man and I must humor him.' Every goldarned yarn I ever told in my life actually happened. And I'm mighty sure I don't bore people either. I don't wait until they nod their heads, I quit while they're interested, and then they come around for more."

"Now, father, don't agitate yourself!"

"I ain't agitatin' myself—fire and darnation!" Hard Knox suddenly leaped into the air, and when he came down he was ripping off his coat. It was smoking, and as he beat the garment against the floor his pipe tumbled out, scattering smouldering tobacco over the carpet.

"Father. Be careful; those ashes on the carpet."

"Ashes'll keep the moths out," panted Knox, pinching out the last bit of flame.

"I've told you about putting your pipe in your pocket," began the daughter. "It is getting so I have to watch you all the time to keep you from catching your death of cold or burning yourself up."

Old Hard Knox sighed. It did look as if he were getting old and forgetful, but he was one to die fighting, even old age. He disappeared into his own room and returned with belt, holsters, and two forty-fours of ancient but tried pattern.

"Some used to go for their guns like this," he explained to Mrs. David. "And some pulled the trigger, but pulling the trigger takes too much time, so I used to go after 'em like this." Knox crossed his arms; the right hand gripped the gun on the left side; the left hand the gun on the right. With his thumbs he "fanned" the hammer, which snapped down the instant it was released. The trigger played no part in the operation. The room was filled with the clicking of the falling hammers. It was not only simple, but interesting. Even the daughter never failed to be impressed.

"As for automatic pistols, bosh! I'd be afraid I'd shoot a furrow down my leg—you squeeze 'em and they're gone." Knox returned his faithful gats to their holsters and lovingly put the relics away in his room. "That's the way we did it when I was young—cross arms and fanned the hammer. Well, I'll be going out for a walk."

Edna Knox hurried forward. "You simply must put on your overcoat, father, it's cold out." And he was hustled into it before he could object.

That summer people said that old man Knox was failing. Certainly his step was not as brisk as ever, and he protested less about being bundled up. His spirits was far from broken, but even he wondered if he'd see another summer.

"Hang it," he said growlingly, "if I could only get out in the open once more,

I'd eat like a horse instead of nibbling the way I am. Still maybe I ain't so old; maybe I'm just being slowly killed by kindness. I don't feel so bad."

Before a hedge fence he paused. The year before he had taken a run and vaulted it easily enough. He eyed the hedge doubtfully for several moments, then, to the amazement of several people in the vicinity, he took a run squarely at the hedge and leaped. For a moment it looked as if he might clear it, but luck was against him, and he sprawled in the grass on the other side.

"Father! Have you gone entirely crazy? You might have broken your neck!"

"Wished I had; it wouldn't hurt so much as a broken heart," answered Knox as he accompanied his daughter into the house. "I think I'll go on a vacation this summer, prospecting or something. I ain't only ailing, I'm failing."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, you'll stay right here where we can take care of you," she announced firmly.

"My kind of people weren't made to be taken care of. They was made to die with their boots on—in action," he replied.

Mid October found him sitting in a chair, properly wrapped in a blanket. On the stand beside him were a number of tonics and medicines. A clock stared him in the face and ticked away the minutes as if to say, "Every minute I tick away is just one less for you, Knox." Hard Knox absorbed medicine and tonic as per orders and told stories of the early days whenever he could find a victim.

And then from a clear sky there fell a bolt. The evening paper arrived about the same time each day. Knox would step out and pick it up, only to be waylaid by his daughter-in-law. This evening was no exception.

"Now, father, give me that paper. You mustn't hurt your eyes by reading. It's liable to bring on headaches." Knox surrendered the paper.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said, "and I'll read. H'm, this may interest you."

She read:

"Two automobile bandits held up the bank to-day at Marvin and obtained fifty thousand dollars in gold and currency. Sheriff Ralph Gill was immediately notified and started from the county seat with a posse. A mad race followed, the outlaws taking refuge in the King Hole Country.

"Sheriff Gill returned to town this afternoon to make arrangements for their capture. He said, 'Two men can hold a regiment at bay. The King Hole Country is a section of bad lands fifty miles from here, formerly occupied by outlaws and cattle thieves. It obtained its name from the outlaw King, who was brought to bay there in 1884, and laughed at the authorities until they starved him out.'"

"That's an infernal lie!" roared Knox, banging his fist down until the tonic bottles rattled.

"Now, father, be calm."

"Calm, thunder! I went into that Hole, shot it out with two of 'em, and marched out two more. That's how they were starved out!"

Mrs. Knox continued:

"The sheriff states they are well armed with automatic pistols, and will undoubtedly put up a battle."

"Automatics, bosh!" shouted Knox. "Let me get at that telephone." He called the newspaper office first, and stated his business. A voice came faintly back:

"The oldest inhabitant is on the phone and wants to give us an account of the battle he fought in the spring of eighty-four, in the King Hole Country. Want to listen to him?" Knox could not hear the reply, but the editor evidently gave directions to let him down easy. "Drop in sometime, Mr. Knox, we're pretty busy right now!" Knox beat him to it in the matter of hanging up. Next he called the sheriff's office and got the chief deputy.

"The sheriff got mixed up, those

bandits weren't starved out in eighty-four, I went in and got 'em!" he began.

"Sure you did," agreed a suave voice.

"Go to the devil!" snapped out Knox, and he banged up the phone. "They won't listen to me. In my time they knew I told the truth, but in these days they agree with you, then giggle behind your back. I could have told that sheriff my way of getting King and Murray, but——" He slumped into his chair.

Young John Knox and his wife attended a motion-picture show that evening. Old Hard Knox was left with instructions to retire at eight o'clock and —not to forget his tonic!

He scowled at the fire, and then he picked up the paper and read the account through once more. The last line riled him. "Automatics, bosh!" he said growlingly. "With a couple of forty-fours——"

The clock struck eight, suggesting bed and the tonic. He glared at the clock, and the slumbering fires of revolt burst into a blaze. He gathered up the tonic and medicine bottles and reveled in the crash of glass as he hurled them one by one into the garbage can. Then he picked up his pipe, loaded it for big game, and puffed steadily. "There," he snapped out at the clock, "now what do you think of that?" He glared down at the article once more. "Automatics—bosh!"

He donned his old outing togs, buckled on his ancient weapons, and again hurled defiance at the clock. "And what do you think of that?" He had drawn his forty-four and covered the clock so quickly that it had all but put up its hands. Lastly he squirmed into a light pack and stepped out into the night. "The way I feel right now, I could blamed near leap that hedge. And I ain't bundled up, either."

"Father's gone!" Mrs. Knox ran out to where her husband was bedding down the family flivver for the night. The flivver was stirred into action and a search made of the neighborhood. No trace. Then they called up the sheriff's office and stated the case.

"We'll do what we can, but all available men are down at the King Hole Country getting ready to battle the outlaws. Sorry, but we can't spare any men right now. He'll probably show up, anyway."

"But he'll die of exposure."

"It isn't so very cold, Mrs. Knox, and from what he says he's seen some mighty hard winters."

"He's a dear old soul, but you can't believe what he says, though he does himself. Thanks; if you should hear anything, let me know."

A tin-can tourist reported the following day that he had picked up a person answering Hard Knox's description and carried him some fifty miles. Then the old party had thanked him and asked to be let out.

"He headed into the mesquite; he was armed with two old gats, had one blanket, some grub, and three canteens filled with water."

"Did he seem to have something on his mind?" queried the younger Knox.

"Yes, he was stirred up about something. Said it was getting so the younger generation didn't even believe in history any more. Something happened in eighty-four he was mixed up in, but I didn't pay much attention to it; you know how these old-timers are."

Young Knox knew exactly how they were.

For October the sun beat down rather fiercely. The man who mopped his brow, grinned, and continued through the mesquite answered the description of "Old Man" Knox, who had wandered away from home in a "state of mental aberration." The ghosts of old-time outlaws doubtless recognized him as Hard Knox, sheriff, on the trail. Sud-

denly he made a dive for his guns, using the cross-arms method of his youth. The guns roared, the reports coming in a steady stream as his thumbs fanned the hammer. A barrel cactus seemed to crumple. "Pretty good," he muttered, "but not as good as the old days." He examined the cactus. "If that had been a man I'd have brought him down. Hands are steady as ever when there's a gun in 'em. Little slow on the draw." He reloaded the weapons, drank sparingly from the canteen, and trudged onward.

The second night he slept beneath the stars, with the romance of the desert night to intoxicate him with its fascination. He was up before dawn and on his way. Nature had dumped a lot of debris here after making a more beautiful part of the world, but Hard Knox found much to admire. A butte that resembled a pile of slag towered two miles away. He made his way toward it, and where no trail existed, he found his way. From time to time he paused. The elements had made some change since eighty-four, but not much. The watercourses were deeper, the mesquite higher in places. He worked his way around the face of the butte, then commenced to climb a trail that a rabbit wouldn't have found any too roomy. He did not look down, because he was subject to dizzy spells at times. At length he found himself on a ledge. He coiled a lariat and hurled it upward several times. Each time the loop vanished and came sliding back, but he persisted until it caught and held. He tested it with his weight, then commenced to climb up the bare face of the rock. He had one canteen full of water. The other two, empty, lay back on the desert several miles apart.

A length he found himself on a broader ledge, two hundred feet above the surrounding country. Progress was easier from this point, but tiring. He rested frequently until he was on top, then studied the country below on the opposite side. In the distance he saw a group of automobiles. A number of horsemen were trotting about the desert, studying the situation. He looked down below and saw two figures. They were watching a narrow opening. Something farther along caught Hard Knox's eye —an automobile.

"They sure must have been hard pressed to drive that this far," he muttered. "As I remember it, it was mighty rough. Well, here goes—there they are, and here I am."

He cursed mildly as he dislodged a boulder. It dropped by leaps and bounds, creating a terrible clatter. The men glanced back, but apparently did not notice Knox. Things were happening at the entrance. Several men, pushing a barrier before them, were entering. The pair separated, and one fired once with a rifle. The men scattered in a panic, leaving one of their number on the ground. He crawled into the brush painfully.

"Just as I told 'em! If they'd listened to me, that wouldn't have happened. Guess I'd better get down there, sudden."

His descent into the valley, or box cañon, for the butte formed an end from which there was no escape, was made without difficulty and a minimum of racket. As he dropped down from the last ledge a startled voice cried, "Who's that?" at the same instant swinging around with an automatic pistol in hand. He fired instantly, and had a hazy glimpse of an old man crossing his arms. The next instant two battered forty-fours cracked. The man dropped and yelled in a manner that indicated he was far from dead.

"Stop right where you are, young feller," Knox shouted to a second man, "and drop that automatic before it goes off and hurts you."

Seeing not only one forty-four, but two, and realizing he was in the open,

the second outlaw dropped his pistol. Old Knox kicked both of them into the sand contemptuously. "Now help your pardner back to the automobile. And always remember this, when expecting people to call on you, keep an eye on the back door as well as the front, sometimes they come in the back way."

When they reached the car, Knox ordered the able man to lower the top. "Now you take the wheel and drive. Keep an eye on your pardner to see that he don't bounce out. I'll stand in the back and wave a white flag, because they's a bunch of sheriffs and deputies out there, and most of the blamed idiots are armed with automatics, and they might go off."

It was a rough old trip to the road, and twice the car nearly overturned. As they emerged, a bullet droned above them. Knox waved the flag frantically.

A determined crowd leaped from the brush and surrounded them, Sheriff Gill in the front rank. "It's old Hard Knox!" he exclaimed. "How'd you do it?"

"The same way I did in eighty-four, and the way I started to tell your chief deputy over the phone, but he wouldn't listen to me," answered Old Knox tartly.

A newspaper man stepped up. Knox was "laying" for him, for this was his hour. "Have you any statement to make, Mr. Knox?"

"Nope, none whatever. If I told you I'd captured these fellows using a cross-arm draw and fanning the hammers, you probably wouldn't understand me, and wouldn't believe me if you did!"

A motion-picture photographer hurried forward and commenced grinding. "Now, Mr. Knox, show us just how you did it!"

And old Hard Knox did, for a camera won't lie.

"Once more, Mr. Knox, a little slower this time. That's fine, thank you."

Then a familiar voice reached his ears, and a pretty woman with an overcoat over her arm hurried from a car that had just arrived. She looked relieved. "Why, there's father. Come here, you might catch your death of cold running around like that. I've got your overcoat."

"No you don't," said "Father" shying violently. "I'm going to kick up a bit for a while and show my heels. First, I'm going back and jump over that hedge. Then I'm going to take the reward for capturing them outlaws and go to town for a "bust."

"Why father!"

THOUSANDS OF WILD DUCKS "GO ON A TEAR"

DISCOVERING that thousands of wild ducks whose headquarters during the early spring on a small island above Riverton, Kansas, were acting in a most peculiar way for ducks, Deputy Game Warden Charles Williams decided to make an investigation. The birds appeared to be intoxicated, yet it hardly seemed possible to Williams that this could be the reason for their queer behavior. He continued to observe the birds for some days, meanwhile quietly conducting an investigation. His efforts were rewarded by the finding of a large quantity of mash on an island two miles above Riverton, which the birds had undoubtedly partaken of in their search for food.

Both Mr. Williams, and Mr. Connelly, president of the Joplin Sportsmen's Protective League, who assisted in making the investigation, called the situation to the attention of Mr. A. W. Howell, of Washington, representative of the United States biological survey department.

Galloping Danger

By

Max Brand

Author of "His Name His Fortune," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST ADVENTURE.

ECONOMY, whether of money or of labor, was carried by Mrs. E. Garrison to the *n*th degree, for economy of all kinds was necessary to the maintenance of her family. She had eight sons and no daughters. Three of the sons had been born at one time, and two at another. She threw herself with devotion into the battle to support these eight lives decently. A remnant of youth and good looks she sacrificed first, then all her time, her temper, her powers of body and soul went into the endless struggle, and she was so far victorious that neither Mrs. Oldham, right-hand neighbor, nor Mrs. Taylor on her left could ever find spot or speck on the new-burnished faces of the Garrison boys when they herded off to school in the morning. Work turned her to a famine-stricken wraith. But her heart grew stronger as she saw the fruit of her agony, eight boys with straight bodies and fresh, clear eyes.

On this wash-Monday, having hung out the sheets and the pillowcases, the napkins, and the tablecloths, and all the "whites," she dragged the clothesbasket back to the kitchen to start the colored articles boiling in the same water which had served for the first batch. Time was when she had changed the water for each set of clothes, but now that her shoulders cracked under the weight of the boiler she moved it as seldom as possible.

"Besides," as she said, "clear water ain't what cleans 'em; it's the boiling and the soap and the blessed elbow-grease."

Yet, on this day, having dumped the colored things into the boiler and opened the door of the stove to shovel in more coal, she discovered that the last live cinder was turning from red to black; the fire was out! It was a calamity, for already the afternoon wore on, and she must rush to finish the washing in time to cook supper; that was the only point on which her husband was adamant—meals had to be punctual. Then she thought of assistance, and remembered that her eldest son was home; the teacher of his class was ill, which accounted for the vacation.

"The great lummox!" mutttered Mrs. Garrison. "He ought to have been down here hours ago, helpin' me hang out and rinsin'." She went to the foot of the

back stairs, narrow, unpainted, and dark, the one untidy place of the house.

"Oh, Lee!" she called. "Lee!"

From above, half whine, half growl: "Yes?"

"Come down here this minute and chop me some kindling. The fire's out."

"Wait till I finish this page."

"I'll wait for nothing. You come hopping, young man."

She heard the clap of the book being shut, the sound of heavy footfalls overhead, and she went into the dining room for an instant's rest. It was a hot day in June, with just enough breeze to drag the smoke from the factories over the town, imperiling the washings which sparkled in a thousand back yards, and filling the air with a thick, sweet odor of soot. Mrs. Garrison relaxed in her husband's armchair in the coolest corner of the room and bent her head to think over the dishes for supper. She closed her eyes, too, and in a moment she was asleep, but she kept on working in her dream, heard the kindling dumped with a rattle on the kitchen floor, and dragged herself from the chair to open the dampers so that the fire roared and the water began to foam in the boiler.

In reality, Lee Garrison had not left his room. That noisy closing of the book, the thumping of his feet on the floor, were all a ruse. He had only sat forward in his chair and drummed with his heels; his thumb kept the place when he snapped the book shut, and now he opened it, still sitting on the edge of the chair, still bending to rise, while his eye swept through the rest of the adventure. For ten swarthy giants had just started into the path of *Lancelot* and barred his way to the perilous chapel with a voice of thunder. They scattered again as the good knight put forward his shield and drew his sword against such great odds as these, and Lee Garrison went with *Lancelot* into the chapel itself, where only one light burned and where the corpse lay "hylled in silk."

He did not change that cramped position, as if about to rise. It was hours later when he heard the deep voice of his father downstairs, and his mother pouring out a protest; then he laid aside his "Malory" with a sigh and stood up. Plainly he would never approach the height or the bulk of William Garrison, but he gave promise of the same broad shoulders, together with better proportions and, throughout, a fine workmanship of which there was little trace in either his father or mother. He was their first-born, coming in those days when "my wife" still was strange on the lips of William Garrison, and when the girl had not yet left all the life of Molly Doane behind her. They hunted reverently for a name, and at last chose "Lee" because his grandfather had fought at Antietam and Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg, wearing the gray. They looked on Lee with a quiet worship. When the other babies flooded the house with noise and care they had less time for him, but his place was never usurped. The terror, the pain, the joy were all new with him, and the first note could never be quite repeated. Besides, he was different in many ways. All were fine boys, and Paul and William Junior probably would be even huger than their father. They already outtopped Lee, but he was the choicer mechanism, the rarer spirit. Sometimes his mother thought, inarticulately, that the bloom of their youth, their first great joy, their hopes and their dreams, had all gone into the body and soul of Lee. The eyes of the seven were straight and clear and misty with good health, but the eyes of Lee held both a black shadow and a light which were his alone. Even when he was a tiny fellow he seemed to be thinking more than he spoke, and she had an odd feeling that he often judged her; therefore she both dreaded and loved him. He was not demonstrative, otherwise his father would have idolized him. For

the rest, he was the laziest boy in Waybury, rumor said. Books had been his world for five years, now, but though his father and his mother often lectured him about this all-consuming passion, they secretly respected it and hoped for great things.

He turned over his situation calmly, for he had swept through so many crises in books that he had little enthusiasm left for the troubles of real life. His mother was accusing him bitterly. It would have meant a hard thrashing if any of the other boys had been the culprit, but his father had always had a strange aversion for caning Lee, and now the worst he could expect would be imprisonment in a dark room without supper. That was the usual punishment, for he wisely never had let them know that it was almost as pleasant to dream in the dark as to read in the light.

"Lee!" called his father. On the way downstairs he heard his mother reiterate: "I just told him to chop some kindling. Then I sat down for a minute and somehow, I don't know just how it happened, but——"

"That'll do, mother. The point is, supper ain't ready, and Lee's to blame. I got to eat if I'm goin' to work, don't I?"

"Hush up, William. Do hush up, or Lucy Ganning'll hear, and it'll be over the neighborhood in a jiffy." Lucy Ganning was a shrewd-eyed spinster living across the street.

"Darn Lucy Ganning!" cried the father. "Come here, Lee!"

The kitchen was in deep shadow, and to Lee, coming down the stairs, it seemed as if his father towered to the ceiling. The soot of the forge was furrowed by perspiration; it was an ugly mask, rather than a face, the eyes looking out through holes rimmed with white. His father's great black hand crushed Lee's shoulder and lifted him from the floor.

"Now," said William Garrison, fighting to control himself, "tell me the straight of this."

"He slapped his book shut and made as if he was coming down," cried the mother. "I went and sat down——"

Lee hunted swiftly for a convincing lie, found none, and told the truth.

"I just stopped to finish the page, dad, honest. And then a minute later you came home."

His mother laughed hysterically. "Will you listen to that? Look at the stove. It's cold, ain't it? It's been two hours long, that minute of Lee's."

"D'you think I'd lie? Dad, it wasn't hardly more'n a minute."

"Lee, how d'you dare say such things? And there he sat all day upstairs never offering to help me, while I was breaking my back with that boiler, and——" Her voice shook; she was mute with self-pity and rage.

"So that's what you been doin'?" said William Garrison. Lee looked sharply at his father and for the first time in his life was really afraid; the big man spoke quietly, but he spoke through his teeth, and he seemed a stranger. Through the dining-room door Lee saw seven white faces; little Jerry and Peter, the twins, were clasping each other in terror.

"You been up there with your books! Your mother was down here slaving. I was up to the forge with fire in my face!"

They were silent, looking at each other, until Lee saw that his father was trembling.

"William," whispered the mother, "William, what d'you aim to do?"

"Close that door!"

She stared at him a moment and then went silently and shut the door across the seven white faces. She came back and reached out her hand, but she did not touch her husband with it.

"William!" she whispered again.

"I'm going to teach him."

She fumbled and caught the back of a chair.

"Don't look that way, mother," broke out Lee. "I'm not afraid."

"Hush!" she cried, but William Garrison had balled both his great fists.

"You don't fear me, eh?" he said, grinding out the words. "Well, by Heaven, you will fear me. D'you hear that? My own son don't fear me!" It was not the voice of his father so much as his mother's eyes that froze the blood of Lee; she kept looking into her husband's face, fascinated, and Lee began to feel that all this time she had known mysterious, terrible things about William Garrison and concealed them from the world. "Come here!" The big hands clamped on Lee's shoulders and wrenched him about. "Listen to me. I been lettin' you go your own sweet way. That's ended. You're no good, and you're comin' to no good end. I'm goin' to make you or break you, and I'm goin' to do it now."

There was no doubt about it. It meant a thrashing, and Lee wondered if he would scream as the others screamed. The thought made him sick. He wanted to die before the test came.

"William," said his mother in that same terrifying whisper, "it wasn't much he done wrong." The big man only turned his head and looked at her, and his fingers worked deeper into the shoulders of Lee. "I'll get the switch," she said.

"Switch? Switch nothing!"

She was upon him with a cry, her hands clutching at the breast of her husband.

"William, you ain't goin' to touch him? You ain't in the right way for it. You—you'll kill him. My baby!"

"Molly, you go sit down."

She wavered, and then dropped into a chair and hugged her face in her arms.

"Don't do it, dad," said Lee. "Don't you see? She can't stand it."

His father blinked as though a fierce light had been flashed in his face.

"Good Heaven!" groaned William Garrison. "A coward, too!"

By one hand he still held Lee, and now he turned and strode out of the kitchen and down the back steps, dragging the boy. He threw back the cellar doors with a crash and went down with Lee carried in front by the scruff of the neck. Below it was almost night, and now that the dimness covered the face of his father, Lee, standing in the corner, felt the horror slip from him. He remembered that worried, gentle face which had leaned above him when he had had scarlet fever.

"Dad," he said, "I'm not afraid, but wait till to-morrow. It's worse on mother than it is on me."

"The devil!" said William Garrison hoarsely, and he caught up a billet of wood from the floor. That voice told Lee plainly that he had to do with a stranger, an enemy. He looked about him, and in the corner stood the wooden sword which he had whittled out when he first read the story of "Excalibur." He caught it by the flimsy hilt.

"I give you warning," he said in a high, small voice, "I'm going to fight back."

"You are, eh? Come here!"

Out of the dark a hand reached at him, and he struck it away with the wooden sword. That first blow was the last; Excalibur snapped at the flimsy hilt. A great black form rushed on him. He was whirled about. A bruising, cutting blow whacked on his shoulders. Lee could have wept with joy, for the pain, instead of leaping out at his teeth in a shriek, traveled inward, a deep, silent hurt. There was only the sound of the blows, the harsh breathing of his father, the staggering impacts, and shooting, burning pains.

A pause with lifted hand. "Have you got enough?" gasped out William Garrison, and a great sense of unfairness rushed through Lee and made tears come in his eyes. He was not being

punished; he was being fought as a grown man fights an equal, and all his fine boy's sense of fair play revolted. If he could have spoken he would have defied the giant in the dark, but he dared not open his lips for fear of the sobs which made his throat ache.

"Have you got enough?" repeated William Garrison, thundering. Then: "I guess that'll do you for a while." He seemed to grow sober at a stride. "Son, I thought you was a coward; maybe I was wrong. You stay here and think it over—what you done and how you lied; I'm coming back later on."

Mr. Garrison disappeared up the steps, the cellar doors crashed shut, and the padlock snapped. At that Lee forgot his pain.

"He wouldn't trust me!" he whispered to himself. "He wouldn't trust me. He locked me up like a dog that's been whipped!"

Lee shook his fist in a silent fury of shame and hate and then sat down to think. Vital, deep emotions did not last long in Lee. His edge had been taken by romance, his sensibilities blunted, but as he heard the noise of supper preparations begin over his head, he was sure of one thing; he would not face his seven brothers in the morning and see their half-sheepish, half-mocking grins. He was like them, now; something to be beaten into obedience. Then there was a deep rumbling—his father's laugh!

He could not believe it, for a time. Then silverware jingled faintly. They sat at the table; they had forgotten.

"And I'll forget you!" said Lee in a burst of sorrow and choking shame. "I'll forget you all, forever!"

It was a simple matter to escape through the cellar window, which, of course, his father had forgotten, and it was equally easy to steal across the kitchen floor while Paul was telling a noisy anecdote about the school. His voice covered the sound of Lee's steps, but through the dining-room door Lee saw his mother's sad face, and he blessed her for it.

Once in the room which he shared with three of his brothers, he lighted the oil lamp and swiftly set about making up his bundle, for he knew exactly what should go into a bundle when one leaves home. He remembered what *Billy* had taken in "The Adventures of a Young Miner," and all the important things which the hero had forgotten. In five minutes his bundle was completed, and he was on his way downstairs.

He stopped at the foot of them to listen. If there had been one word for him, one syllable to show they missed him, he would have turned back, but they were all exclaiming about something he did not understand, and Lee went out into the night.

CHAPTER II.

THE STAKED PLAINS.

THERE are some who alter little between youth and manhood, and Lee Garrison was one of these. He was thirteen when he curled up in the corner of a freight car and awoke a little later with the wheels jolting beneath him. A dozen years later, if any one from Wayburg had come across a certain tanned line rider in the Llano Estacado, he would probably had recognized Lee in spite of sombrero and chaps. His shoulders had broadened to the full of their early promise. His face was little changed. At thirteen he had looked much older than his age; at twenty-five he seemed much younger.

Most cattlemen have to hold themselves to the monotony of their work by steady effort, consciously tensed to be prepared for little things, straining their eyes across miles of shimmering sand to watch the herds and mark the sick or the strayed, until the crowfoot wrinkles come, the brows draw down; and boys acquire a grim, wistful expression that

should not be theirs until middle age. But Lee Garrison was not one of those who fight nature; he accepted it. His nearest approach to the alert was quiet watchfulness like that of the dog which sees the rabbit but prefers hunger to the long race in the heat. No doubt this accounted for Lee's unwrinkled forehead. From a distance he appeared calmly dignified; at close hand his face was rather a blank, except for the occasional swift play of his eyes, and the southwest, which has not time to ponder over idiosyncrasies or exceptions, put down Lee Garrison as a lazy man and filed him away in its memory under that heading.

Even granting the celebrated vacuity of Lee's mind, men wondered how he could stick to line riding. Hour by hour, day by day, week by week, month by month, he journeyed up and down a hundred miles of fence, never visited except by the chuck wagon, and traveling to the ranch house, fifteen miles away, only on state occasions. Even at round-up time, when he could have made his five dollars and head as a bronc-peeler, he chose rather to keep up that deadly routine which drives more sensitive cow-punchers mad. Always he was loading down the fence with that infinite line of posts fogging into view, dipping now and again into a hollow, or swaying in or out to avoid a rock, but usually only a line which went straight across a flat earth, a string of heads dwindling and bobbing up and down to the trot of his horse.

Twelve hours a day he kept the saddle with hammer, nails, pliers, wire stretcher, and boot sack full of staples. The posts were old, the staples worked loose, and it was a continual mounting and dismounting, a blow with the hammer, a staple sent home, and then back into the saddle again, only to see a strand sagging a dozen yards ahead. Off again, on again, all day, every day—the patience of Indians themselves often gave way to gibbering idiocy after a few months of this labor, but Lee Garrison held out; he stayed by preference. One might have thought that he loved the quiet and nature as the old trout fisher loves it—but the staked plains! Countless Spanish daggers were all that showed above ground level. There were not mountains rolling against the horizon, cool and blue. For life, therefore, the prairie dogs!

It was one of those which made Lee pause in the very act of lifting his horse into a canter to head for the nearest of his dugouts; for it would be dark by the time he had finished his supper and haste was needed, but the prairie dog stood by his mound looking like a miniature beaver, his tail "jiggering" up and down with the fury of his barking. A companion jumped out of the hole and joined in the defiance.

"Sassy little devil," murmured Garrison, and jerked out his revolver. The bullet merely knocked a spray of sand over the prairie dogs as they whirled toward safety.

It was a result which Lee had small time to observe, for his horse leaped straight into the air and came down stiff-legged, swallowing his head. Past five posts he bucked with educated viciousness, but at the sixth he tossed up his head and looked back at the rider as though asking pardon for such folly; even a painful jab of the spurs only made him switch his tail and break into a perfectly measured lope. The face of the rider, which had lighted for an instant, now went blank again.

"Of all the no-good hosses I ever see," said the master, "you're the worst and the yaller-heartedest, 'Pinto.' When you come out to me I had hopes of you."

The pinto cocked a wary ear back and turned the corner of a red-stained eye.

"But," concluded the line rider, "now you can't pitch enough to make conversation."

Yes, he undoubtedly could ride as well as the next man, but as a marksman he was distinctly ordinary. But the sigh he heaved was not on account of the missed shot; it was what that miss signified. When he first arrived in the cattle country his boy mind had been filled with a glamour of it, and he had begun to school himself to be a model knight of the plains—expert rider, shot, and cattleman, knowing all the desert and the creatures of the desert. Only in one ambition had he succeeded; he could stick in a saddle as though he were glued to the leather, but all his other aspirations were so long dead that the thought of them barely served to awaken in him a faint melancholy regret. So an old man sighs as he thinks back to the star-storming aspirations of his youth.

At the dugout he unsaddled his horse and hobbled him carefully, for Pinto's chief talent and ambition was to break and run for the ranch house fifteen miles away.

Next he prepared his supper from the food cached in the dugout, and within an hour after his arrival he had cooked and eaten his supper and spread his bed.

It was a gray, cold evening, more like January than March, and the high mist which was hardly noticeable during the day now shut away the color of the sunset and the sun went down red. The prairie dogs no longer chattered, but a bull bat sat on the nearest fence post wailing at him like a whippoorwill, and twice a prairie-dog owl, hunting close to the ground, skimmed past the dugout, a living shadow, uttering the sad cry which always seems to come from a great distance.

So Lee Garrison made himself comfortable in the dugout, lounging with a saddle for a pillow, and a clean lantern ready behind his head, though it was not yet dark enough for artificial light. Behind him lay three books, which he touched after the manner of the after-dinner smoker, fingering his cigars and considering which flavor he will choose. It was some time before he made up his mind, and indeed, to a lover of this sort of reading there was little measure of preference among three such fountain-heads of romance as the "Arabian Nights," "Boccaccio," and "Malory." These were his treasury, of which he never wearied, each of them exhaustless in incident, thronging with pictures.

But he suited his daily selection to his mood, having sometimes a taste for the voluptuous adventures of the Arabian tales; or often for "Boccaccio," wicked, delightful, chuckling at sin and even smiling at virtue; but most frequently, as on this evening, he chose the "Morte d' Arthur." It was his first love among books and would remain his last, for though the "Arabian Nights" might cloy him, or "Boccaccio" grow tiresome, he never lost his passion for those whom "Malory" keeps alive in sword and armor at Whitsuntide in Camelot, or at the gate of some dark castle in the forest. He sometimes found the "Nights" overrich, and "Boccaccio" flat, but never the style of "Malory," rippling alike over great and small, monotonous sometimes, delightfully archaic, but with phrases here and there like sword thrusts, and whole passages of exquisite harmony.

Again on this night it was "Malory." The ragged covers opened, the pages, chipped at the corners, yellowed, stained, slipped away of their own accord; and in ten seconds he saw the knight with the covered shield send *Tristram* hurtling out of his saddle—a mighty fall! And he rolled thrice over, grasping his hands full of dirt each time. Lee Garrison followed the fight with motions of his clenched right hand.

Such was his absorption that he heard neither the rattling approach of the chuck wagon nor the long haloo of the driver. Not until "Baldy" stood at the door, filling it, and his shadow fell across the book, did Lee look up.

"What I'd like to know," shouted Baldy, without other greeting, "is why the devil you don't have regular stopping places regular times. I started this morning right after chow, and I been on your trail ever since."

"Sorry," said Lee, and though he lowered the book his forefinger kept the place.

No human being had come that way in four weeks, and Baldy knew it. Therefore he pushed back his hat, and his head was as red as his face while he considered whether or not this indifference were an insult, and if he should take it up as such. He debated, glowering upon the bent head of Lee Garrison. But, after all, it was a man's privilege to sit silent like a fool owl on a post when a chance of conversation came his way. In a word, the line rider was a "nut," and not to be judged according to the standards of ordinary men. Baldy turned on his heel and without further attempt at speech unloaded his cargo and dumped it beside the dugout.

"What you want next time?" he snapped out when the last box was deposited.

"Nothing," answered Garrison, and then roused himself a little. No matter how odd a man may be in Texas he cannot safely forget all obligations of hospitality. "Maybe you're hungry?" he suggested lamely.

"I ain't."

"Or needin' a smoke?"

"I ain't."

It gave Baldy infinite satisfaction to demonstrate his own powers of curtness.

"Or thirsty?"

"Eh?"

"There's some water——"

"Water? The devil!"

Garrison sighed with relief and returned with pacified conscience to the book. Here Baldy remembered in the nick of time the most important detail of his errand to the line rider.

"I brought out another hoss for you," he said.

There was no answer.

"Nice sleepy ol' hoss," continued Baldy invitingly.

He himself and five others of the outfit had been pitched from the saddle by that same dull-eyed outlaw and now, as usual, the foreman sent his intractable mount to the line rider. For it was a well-established and significant detail of Garrison's reputation that he had never been thrown, at least not to the knowledge of those who had seen him work for five years in the Llano Estacado.

Baldy looked back at the old brown horse which stood with drooping head tethered behind the wagon. Its lower lip hung pendulous, and it slept where it stood, but at the sight a sharp pain ran through the left shoulder and hip of the cow-puncher and his face puckered at the reminiscence. He would have sold his shop-made boots for a quarter to see this silent fool in the saddle on yonder brown horse; he would have given away his vast sombrero with a joyous heart if he could have driven back to the ranch and told the boys how the dummy was thrown on his head. But Garrison had heard the news without stirring.

"Ol' hoss is tied up behind the wagon right now," went on Baldy with insidious smoothness. "Which you wouldn't mind having him handy for saddling like that, would you? No work roping him, nor nothing. He's jest all handy."

The import of this drifted from afar into the ears and finally into the consciousness of Lee Garrison. He put down his book with a sigh, lifted his saddle and bridle, and climbed from the dugout. As for Baldy, he masked a smile by rubbing the back of his hand across his mouth while he made his eyes wide, childishly innocent. The brown horse was one of those rare outlaws which have not the slightest objection to the weight of a saddle. Lee Garri-

son, with his saddle over his arm, paused in front of the sleepy head and looked long and earnestly at the new candidate for his string.

"Does he guess?" whispered Baldy. "Pray Heaven he don't guess! He don't!"

This last came in the nature of an outburst of thanksgiving, for the line rider stepped carelessly to the near side of the brown and tossed his saddle upon it with such lack of precaution that the stirrup rapped the ribs of the horse loudly. But the outlaw only canted one long, mulish ear forward and opened the opposite eye. Baldy quivered with silent delight.

"Don't let there be no warning," he continued in solemn invocation. "Let 'er hit like lightning at noon!"

"The "dummy" had foot in stirrup, and now it came—a creaking of leather, a snort, a winged leap into the air, and then came the thudding impact of four hoofs with four stiff legs above them and an arched back topping it all. The brown horse came down with its head between its forelegs, a pyramid, with Lee sitting on the apex.

After that Baldy snatched his hat from his head, twisted it into a knot, and flung it on the ground. He went through odd motions, swaying from side to side, stiffening suddenly, jerking his hands in, pitching them out, like a cheer leader rousing a rooting section to frenzy, pushing the home team over the goal line. Presently he stood frozen in his last awkward attitude, his face illumined with that mysterious light of beatification which Rafael keeps playing about the eyes of his cherubs.

"My Heaven," whispered Baldy reverently. "My Heaven!"

The evening went rapidly into the twilight, the prairie dogs came out to watch, the bull bat sat silently on the fence post. Then the unrhythmic beat of hoofs ceased.

"It's true," gasped out Baldy. "I seen it—with my own eyes."

The line rider came back, passed the driver of the chuck wagon without a word, brushed the perspiration from his forehead, sat down, sighed, and then picked up his book as one in a dream. Baldy gaped at him, and then he walked away so softly that one might have said he went tiptoe over the sand.

When he started on the homeward journey he took the brown outlaw back with him.

CHAPTER III.

JOHN RAMPS.

THE lantern burned clear, and Garrison was content. Before him stretched a lengthy maze of adventures, jousts, waylayings, challenges; half a dozen full evenings of readings before he came to the quests of the Holy Grail and the breaking of that peerless fellowship of the Round Table; so Lee, rich in the prospect, stretched himself at the loaded board. He could never see in the Grail a sufficient cause for the ruin of the Round Table. Therefore, he always approached that section of "Malory" with a fallen heart, but tonight he was reading of the crisp early days when *Camelot* was a new name. He raised his head from the book only once; it was only to feel the settling down of utter night.

For he had learned that there is an instant of white magic just at the end of the evening. Perhaps it is the time when the creatures which see in the dark come into their own. That moment had come when Lee lifted his head. The silence which camped on the stake plains became a listening thing with a heartbeat somewhere in it; the breeze lifted the corner of the page like an invisible finger. So ended the dull day, and the night began with a breathless pause as when a door opens, but those within are not yet seen. The world died with the day, and the people of the books sprang into life. Ladies who, in the day, were bland names, became on

such a night, brilliant realities with infinite life of smiles and glances. About the lonely castle he now saw the wilderness sweeping in green waves like a sea, covering the walls with a spray of vines. So solemn became the illusion of that moment that the figure which loomed in the doorway and stood there, swaying, seemed only an intruder in the dream.

Between an American Indian and an Arthurian legend, however, there existed a gap sufficient to shock Garrison into wakefulness. It was a broad-shouldered, bow-legged fellow in moccasins, with a hickory shirt, a hat set so far toward the back of his head that it pushed his ears forward, and, dangling to his shoulders, where two plaits of hair wrapped in red flannel, with a red snapper at each end. He supported himself with his hands against the door, glaring at the white man and leaning in as though he were about to leap on the prostrate figure. That illusion lasted long enough to bring Lee Garrison to his feet with the speed of a snake uncoiling. Then he saw that the poor fellow had braced himself against a staggering weakness. His arms shook under the weight they supported, and the glare of his eyes was that inward light of suffering long endured.

Among the few established facts about Lee Garrison was an aversion to both Mexicans and Indians, but after a single glance at this man he caught him under the armpits and swung him down to the floor of the dugout. It was a dead weight that he lifted. The shoulders of the Indian gave under the pressure of an ugly limpness, and he remained in exactly the position in which Garrison deposited him; shouldering against the wall with one leg twisted oddly to the side and his right hand doubled against the floor, the weight of the arm falling against the back of the wrist. In spite of the fiery eyes of the Indian, Lee knew that the man was dying. He ripped away a stack of cans from a corner. They tumbled with a prodigious racket across the floor and revealed the hidden treasure, a half-emptied flask of whisky, which he handed to the Indian.

But the fingers in which the man tried to grasp it slipped from the glass as though numb with cold, and his arm fell. Garrison, shuddering at the sight of that mortal weakness, placed the flask at the lips of the Indian, and when he took it away the bottle was empty.

"Good!" sighed the other, and he had strength enough to take the cup of water which Lee poured.

"I have stayed too long," said the Indian in an English so perfectly enunciated that Lee started. "I must go on again."

He spread his hands on either side of him and strove to raise his body. There was no result, and a shadow dropped across his eyes. Perspiration glistened on his coppery forehead, but he smiled at the white man.

"For Heaven's sake, lie down and take it easy," said Lee.

The other shook his head. There was a bubbling huskiness in the voice in which he explained gravely: "I am hollow inside and filled with fire. If I lie down it will run into my head and burn me up."

"A very good idea," said Lee quietly. "A fellow can fool fire that way, now and then. Give me your hand, will you?"

He took the languid wrist. The skin was hot; the pulse ran faint and fast as the ticking of a clock. The Indian was dying of pneumonia.

"I'm sorry I've finished your whisky stock," said he. "I'll bring you out a new supply when I come back this way. My name is John Ramps."

Lee mumbled his own name in acknowledgment of the introduction. It would be morning before he could go to the ranch and return with help, and

long before morning John Ramps would be dead.

" 'Moonshine' will think I've left his trail," said the Indian. "But though Moonshine is clever, one can't expect a horse to know what goes on inside the brain of a man. He could run faster than my horses ran, and naturally he doesn't think I can overtake him on foot."

The feet of John Ramps were clad in moccasins, worn to shreds.

"Is Moonshine a horse?" asked Lee.

"You don't know him? Well, this is far from his home country. There were eight of us with horses when we took the trail of Moonshine in the Diamond Star Desert."

"But that's in Idaho, Ramps!" cried Garrison.

"Yes, a long trail. However, I'm surprised that you don't know of Moonshine, Mr. Garrison. He's a silver-gray mustang. You've seen moonlight running on water? That's his color. Fire in a wind, galloping across a stubble field, that's the way he runs. Now I must go. Moonshine thinks I have lost him. All the others who have tried have lost. Even 'Handsome' Harry Chandler lost. He took his best horse. And last he rode his black mare. But even 'Laughter' could not turn Moonshine. So he thinks that John Ramps, too, has failed. He does not know that I can still run as fast as the wind.

He lurched to his feet, but at the first step he crumpled into the arms of the white man, and Lee laid him on the blanket. He thought, then, that the end had come, for there was no perceptible breathing, but he found, at length, a faint flutter of the heart. He sponged the face and breast and hands of the man and then sat beside John Ramps to wait for the final rattle of breathing. Literally the dying man was a frame of bones loosely covered with skin. His mouth was fallen ajar, but to Lee Garrison there was nothing repulsive in the face. It took him back to the quests of Arthur's paladins after the Holy Grail. They must have ridden like this, day and night, wasting themselves to shadows, burned by their desire for one glimpse of salvation. Even so the Indian and his eight companions had ridden a thousand miles, killing their horses under them, no doubt, until only this man remained of the eight. He had spurred his last mount until it died, and then, half mad with weariness and the hysteria of fever, he had gone on by foot.

The Indian spoke. It was not the death rattle, but a harsh phrase of Indian dialect. The voice went on, detached, broken, but now it spoke English.

"Who stays to throw water when the forest burns? John Ramps is burning for the horse!"

There followed a burst of rapid chatter in his own tongue; the next English words made only a few phrases: "Let her go to another wickiup; I cannot stay."

Here he fell into inaudible mutterings, rolling his head from side to side and plucking aimlessly at his breast. Then: "Be not afraid. It is not Tahquits pounding the bones of a victim. The hoofs of Moonshine make the thunder, and John Ramps is on his back."

Was it weeks, months, even years, perhaps, since John Ramps started on the trail of the stallion? The chase was as strange to Lee as the story of the Grail. It was stranger, for in the years of his riding on the ranges he had found in horses only creatures to be subdued by main force, whipped into obedience, crushed with the stronger hand. A sullen anger came in him at the thought that a dumb beast had been able to kill this man; and also he felt a pang that the man of a lower race could have responded to a spark that had never touched him; could have risked his life with so open a hand for the sake of a beast.

The Indian spoke again, and his voice was lower and harsher; the breath seemed to die between every dragging syllable.

"Brothers, it was no fault in the trap; the trap was good, but he is like his name—he is like Moonshine, and he eludes us. A man can take fire on two sticks and carry it through the wind; or he can gather water in his hands; or he can even put the wind in a bag and keep it; but who can gather moonshine?"

The picture Lee Garrison saw was the narrow, yellow triangle of a camp fire and eight swarthy faces glittering by that light. A sudden shout from John Ramps made his hair bristle. The Indian had jerked himself to a sitting posture, and his face was a frenzy.

"Ho! We have him. My mountain sheep, my red beauty, faster, faster! Hei!"

Over his head he swung one arm, a gesture so vivid that the whirling loop of the lasso flashed like a shadow across the eye of Lee. The hand fell; the body pitched back, and Lee, leaning close over a face which was contorted in the last agony, heard a whisper: "He is gone!"

The same whisper, it seemed, drained the last life from John Ramps, for almost at once a mist brushed across the fiery eyes as though the lamp which shone down on them had grown suddenly dim, and a gradual smile stole across the lips of John Ramps. Perhaps, thought the cow-puncher, the soul of the Indian was already flying down the trail of Moonshine and saw the fugitive.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST SIGHT.

IT seemed to Lee, as he looked down to the eternal triumph of that smile, that the most opulent cattle kings did not build as well as John Ramps, for their names would last only as long as the fortune held together. But John Ramps, building nothing, had left a thing that would never die, a story of which he was a part. He died for the sake of it, and as long as men loved horses they would not cease to thrill when they heard how the Indian trailed the gray stallion a thousand miles across the mountains. Here, in a bronze skin, was the type of a *Galahad*. Lee went to the door of the dugout. The moonlight lay in pale waves over the rolling ground outside. There was not a sound. He thought back a little. The cattle range had been a joyless place to him, a drab region, but it had at least given him escape from people and provided him with a great blessing—silence. As he stood there he grew sad with the desire to be among men. He had lived among them with his eyes closed, for there must be others in whom burned the fire of John Ramps. Perhaps with patient searching he could find one such and buckle that man to him for a friend.

In the meantime he must bury the Indian. Here on the plains was the place for him, lying face up, not too far away from this same moonlight.

He picked up the body of John Ramps, a withered body of bones and skin, and fifty yards from the dugout he placed it in a deep crevice among the rocks. Prying against the keystone of the overhanging boulders he loosed and sent down a ponderous shower of rock. The roar of the fall filled his ears for a moment longer, and then the peace of the desert washed like a wave about him. In a near-by Spanish dagger the wind was whispering; that was the end. All trace of John Ramps was gone from the face of the earth, and only one man knew his monument.

Then, as though a voice from behind bade him turn, he swung sharply and saw what seemed a cloud of moonlight gathered into a moving form, half shadow, half mist, half brilliance. It glided over a hilltop, disappeared in the wash of shade that filled a gully, and

slipped into view again over a closer rise of ground. It was Moonshine.

If he had never heard of the stallion before, the name would have burst from his lips as it did now in a shout. Moonshine stopped with a suddenness that sent his mane tumbling forward in a flurry of silver, and stood fast, a creature of light.

He neighed like a challenge, or a gloating over the dead man, then whirled and fled. Oh, the swing and lightness of that stride—like a wave in the free ocean!

Perhaps the soft surface sand buried the noise of hoofs. Like a phantom the wild horse drifted over the hill and faded into the shadow below.

He came into view again on a farther rise; then Moonshine was absorbed in the heart of the night. The face of Lee Garrison was like that of one who struggled to keep alive in his memory a dying music.

It was hard to turn back, for a power drew him down the trail of the horse. He closed his eyes. At once against the black of his vision the form of Moonshine stood out, luminous silver.

He had found his passions so entirely inside the covers of books that this reality, taking him by the throat, bewildered him. Had the soul of John Ramps come into his body? It was the memory of the mustang's gallop that maddened him; to sit on that back would be to sit like a leaf in a level wind.

Between his knees he could sense the lithe, strong barrel of Moonshine; and his face was hot with longing to feel the wind of Moonshine's galloping.

He found himself in the dugout with his head between his bands. His face was hot; the fingers against his face were cold; his heart fluttered in a strange, airy manner; but when he sprang up his mind at least was clear.

This note he scrawled: "I got a hurry call, and I am gone." This, with some perishables which could not be trusted without guard in the dugout, he put into the saddlebags, after cinching up Pinto. When he had cut the hobble ropes the little horse, true to his homing instinct, darted toward the ranch house. So with the bridges burned Lee turned back to the dugout and swept together the necessaries. Since he had to travel on foot he cut his list of essentials to the bone. In a minute, at most, he was striding across the sand.

A cartridge belt slung over his shoulder carried his ammunition, and it supported at the lower end of the loop the heavy Colt .45. To catch a horse without a rope is nearly impossible. Lee bore thirty feet of it. A saddle blanket for shelter at night, some sulphur matches, a small package of salt, a great, powerful knife with one razor edge and another blade which defied the thickest tin can, these make up his pack, together with some odds and ends which included that prime essential of the cattle country, pliers, the key to the barbed-wire region.

It would not have been too much to carry over even fairly firm roads, but the sand melted like quicksilver under his feet, for he wore the small-soled, sharp heeled boots of the cattleman, which give the smallest walking surfaces. The heels sank deep, and in the midst of each stride there was a giving and slipping back. His eye had formed the horseman's habit of wandering forward across the landscape at the pace of a lope, and now his glances pulled him forward as though he were leaning against the wind. There is a quick, soft step for sand, barely breaking the surface as the foot falls, Indian fashion; but Lee was fighting ahead, slipping, stumbling.

The night was cool, yet Lee in ten minutes was dripping, and he sighed in ardent relief as the sand shelved to a shore of firm ground. He had reached the Capped Rock, where, the ground having settled on one side of a fissure,

a ridge of broken stone protrudes along the fault, and great boulders tumble from the plateau to the lower level. From the upper ridge he scanned the dimmer regions below him anxiously.

Something winked far off like a bit of water exposed to the moon. The silvery shape dissolved in the shadows of another hollow. It seemed a mad thing for a man to start out to walk down a horse—and such a horse as Moonshine above all! Indeed the stallion might shake off all pursuit by one great burst across the country, fifty miles of running, say, which would effectually destroy all hopes of keeping the trail. Yet there was small fear that Moonshine would be so full of heart after a thousand-mile hunt across the mountains. The Indians had served one purpose by their long trailing; they had taken the edge off the mustang's wildness, and they had blunted his fear of man.

Many times, lately, he must have had the scent of a man in his wide nostrils, and many times he must have shaken off the horror with a small burst of galloping. Probably he would do the same with Lee, just keeping out of the danger distance. In that case there was one chance in three, the cow-puncher thought, of success; for the stallion would hardly have shaken off his pursuer and settled down to graze when once more the man would plod within sight and Moonshine must be off again; and hardly would he lie down to sleep when again the man scent would drift close. The gray must sleep on his feet, and even then he would only have an opportunity for brief dozes. As for Lee, he could choose his time for rest and make his sleep brief; and he had all the advantages of the general who takes the offensive and keeps the opponent guessing. All of this went swiftly through the mind of the cow-puncher, and then he started down among the rocks.

CHAPTER V.

GUADALUPE.

FOR all the pleasant ease of the first few steps on the firm ground, he quickly discovered that even the sand was preferable to this going, for sharp-edged rocks bruised his feet through the thin soles, and his spurs caught and clanked on every projecting stone. Moreover, the scrupulously shop-made boots gave no play at heel or instep, and he lumbered and halted in his stride. A sensation of prickling heat about the heel told him that the skin was chafing away. But a snug shoe and a horse with a long rein, these had been his two dominant requirements for so long that he had come to think of his body as necessarily terminating in boots. The yipping of a coyote mocked him as he paused and stared gloomily on the bright spurs, and the barking made him think of the coyote's fluffy fur and how it would feel against his aching feet. The cry of the little hunter was coming down the wind, for otherwise Lee could never have come within a mile of the wanderer's acute nose, but now Lee took covert in a brake of scrub cedar and heard the yelping coming straight at him.

The wind had blown a black slit across the hollow, and against this darkness the light-yellow body of the skulker appeared plainly a moment later. He trotted with his head low, for since the wind was at his back the coyote had to trust to the treacherous ground smells, distinguishing nicely between the new and the old, foe and friend, that which would hunt, that which might be hunted. Two rope lengths from Lee he stopped and stood alert. Whatever sixth sense warned him, the coyote let reason outweigh intuition, and instead of changing his course at once he pointed his slender nose and raised his cry. The bark of Lee's revolver turned it into a sharp squeak; the yellow body shot high, struck the earth again with an

audible impact, and lay wonderfully limp and thin.

As he ripped off the skin from the hot form, snorting the pungent odor out of his nostrils, Lee Garrison could only pray that Moonshine would be spending much of this night in sleep. The fresh pelt would be useless until it was at least partially dried, so he cut four small cedar branches to stretch the hide and fastened it securely at his back. There it must dry as he walked.

The pause allowed his feet to puff, but after the first few tortured steps the pressure shut off the circulation of the blood; presently all feeling ceased below the ankles. There was only the ache of leg muscles protesting against this unaccustomed exercise.

He went on. The soreness grew; the aches accumulated and sprang out in surprising places; but he set himself a measured pace and kept at it with monotonous effort. He felt certain that the stallion must have followed a cut through certain low hills, far ahead, and to this goal he pointed. If pain were the price of Moonshine he was beginning to pay in generous installments.

Now black mountains began to grow out of the horizon, seeming to drift toward him. The sky turned from full silver to a ghostly mist, fog-colored—dawn was coming. With that, weariness struck him squarely between the eyes, and he knew he must make a halt.

Skirting into a cedar brake he saw the nervous head and top knot of a blue Mexican quail, and shot it. He dressed the quail swiftly and placed it over a fragrant flame on cedar branches. As long as he could, he endured the odor of the roasting meat, and then he devoured his meal half raw.

The day was quickening, now, the sky blue, the east fresh with color; a few breaths of that keen, clear air drove the ache of sleeplessness from his brain, and he started again toward the pass among the tumbling hills.

In the firm sand of the pass he found the small prints of Moonshine as clear as print on a white page, and, with his revolver, he measured the steps accurately, scratching the odd distance on the barrel of his gun. By this measure, better than by any other method, he could identify the stallion's trail.

As he hurried on, it seemed to Lee that out of the prints before him the body of the horse arose and drifted before him with rhythmic pace.

During the day he halted only twice, for after a pause it became more than a man could endure to step again on those agonizing feet. That straightforward progress brought a reward, however. He came on Moonshine beside a water hole near plenty of long grass which the stallion was eating so eagerly that Lee guessed how famine pinched him. For his own part, as the gray raced off into the evening, he had barely strength to stagger to the edge of the hole. There he dropped into the mud and drank the lukewarm water. Afterward, it was vain to attempt to drag his boots off over those swollen feet, so he cut away the leather below the ankles and tossed spurs and all far off. One glance at his feet, and he buried them in the mud. It was a green slime, unspeakably soft, cool. It drank up the fever of his blood; it cleared his head; it drained away the thousand aches while he lay flat on his back, breathing with a hoarse rattle of content, his arms thrown out crosswise, staring up to the evening sky where the colors were mingling softly and gayly.

There, with his feet in the mud, he took the half-dried skin of the coyote and fashioned moccasins. A double fold of skin made the soles; the uppers were crudely shaped and joined to the sole with a strip of sinew passed through holes which he cut with his knife. That done, in the gathering darkness he lay back and waited until a blue quail came fearlessly to the water and killed it.

It was painful going in the morning; but he kept at it gingerly along a trail that was as clear as if it had been stamped out. He reached the Pecos Country that day, with the great brown mountains growing up beyond to the white snow that topped Guadalupe. The rolling land swept into a great vega, and in the midst of it he stumbled upon the river. A few rods back it was not visible; and when he reached the famous stream he found little three-foot banks hemming in a swift, muddy current no broader than a street. He forded that bitter water at the Delaware Crossing and went on into a sandy country.

The sign led toward the Guadalupe until at night, at the base of the great mountain which now filled a quarter of the sky, the trail swung sharply to the right. It made Lee Garrison draw a deep breath of relief. Moonshine had traveled swiftly that day, and now he must lead by many a mile, but by that veering of the tracks Lee knew that the mustang was taking the ravine to the right in order to cut into the heart of the mountains. That would lead him about on a winding course, and Lee, going straight over the shoulder of the mountain, might cut across the path before Moonshine came up with him. For that reason he decided to eat his supper if he could find game, rest a brief time, and then press straight over the shoulder of the mountain.

Luck gave him his game in the form of a white-tailed buck which stood out of the short brush against the sky line not two hundred yards away. Lee stalked him as silently as a snake, and, coming up out of the gully, he fired from below and dropped the deer with the first shot. It was a fine eight-point fellow running close to one hundred and fifty pounds, but all of him went to waste except the plump hind quarters. Off one of these Lee cut himself a huge steak and broiled it over cedar coals, a meal for a king. While he smoked his cigarette afterward, he watched the falling night across the plains below, while above him the air whispered through evergreen boughs, and that nameless keen fragrance was blowing. His body ached when he thought what a bed those piled branches would make! But when the butt of the cigarette was tossed away he paused only long enough to massage his sore leg muscles with his knuckles, fasten the untouched quarter of the buck across his shoulders, and then he pressed on up the slope.

At midnight he reached a crest that seemed closer to the stars than he had ever been before, but they were visible for a moment only. A freshening wind was carrying great burdens of clouds across the sky, and the stars were flicked out one by one. In the redoubled darkness the voices of the wind crowded close to him with lonely wailing, but Lee armed himself against despondency.

He glanced back of him to make sure of his direction and then went down the Slope toward the ravine along which Moonshine must surely be climbing.

A gust, as he started, struck him heavily, and instead of slackening it increased in stronger puffs, one crowded after the other, humming and whining across the ridges and plucking at Lee Garrison with fingers of ice. Below, the valley was dark as a cave.

He was too old a cattleman to become panic stricken at the approach of a storm, but as he went on he took stock of the swift falling of the temperature, the rapidly increasing numbness of toes and fingers, the prickling about his cheek bones. A true hurricane was in the brewing. A blast of sleet rattled through the shrubs, then clouds of snow poured about him, waving down like great moth wings and clothing the air to stifling with its density. It seemed that he would never stagger to the bottom of the first descent.

A moment later, however, he came

into that ravine which, he knew, must be the course of Moonshine as he crossed the Guadalupes. The level-driving snow literally roofed the gorge, but he could see for a little distance up and down. Behind an outcropping of rock he crouched to wait, straining his eyes down the hollow for some sign of the stallion. It might be that Moonshine had turned with the gale and drifted as cattle drift, but Lee had strong faith that in spite of wind and weather the gray would keep to his course like a thinking man. The cold mountains went by. Drifts of sheeted snow from time to time blew past him like ghosts, or galloping gray horses, and his heart leaped at so many false hopes that he would not believe when, out of the snow flurries below him, he made out a moving shape which grew into the mustang struggling through the storm on his journey north, steady as a ship which drives by compass.

He slid his hand back and gripped the coil of the rope. Gallantly Moonshine came up the rise until, just in front of Lee, an arm of the wind shot sidewise and stopped the horse like a jerk of a stake rope. Lee Garrison shook out the noose a little. He lurched up and forward for the cast. But his body crumbled under the effort. The cold had made him as brittle as straw, for he had crouched by the rock too long. His legs buckled at the knees. The rope was caught by the wind and flung back into his face while the horse leaped past him with a snort, almost within the reach of his finger tips.

To tantalize him the more, he regained muscular control at once. The strong effort now sent his blood leaping. He sprang to his feet and rushed down the ravine shouting, shaking the rope above his head. The storm tore off his curses at his lips. He stumbled and fell flat a dozen times. But he kept on until he heard, far away, the storm-drowned neigh of Moonshine. Then, with a groan, he crumpled up on a bank of snow.

To be continued in the next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

WOULD PLANT PINE TREES IN DEVASTATED AREAS

IN the San Dimas Cañon, about fifty miles from Los Angeles, California, a group of foresters and rangers are hopeful that their efforts to prove that barren lands can be replanted and reforested will soon convince the scoffers who have disagreed with their plans. The men have taken an area of ten acres of land, burned and barren, and have planted on it various kinds of pine trees, which they are watching and tending most carefully in the hope that their experiment may be a success. Lumbermen say that reforestation is not a success, that pine trees cannot be replaced.

Unless the devastated areas of California can be replanted, that State, particularly the southern part of it, faces grave danger, in the next few years, of a timber famine. Even now the watersheds are growing indistinct, the hills and mountains show the effect of deluges coursing their way unhampered down the bare slopes, and the rapid spread of fires gives further testimony to the speed with which the moisture leaves the slopes for the lower levels. If some means is not devised by which the growth on the mountain slopes can be replaced, even the water supply for the city will, in a short time, be interfered with to a considerable degree. The authorities, aware of the seriousness of the situation, are giving the group of foresters every assistance within their power.

Never Saner

By Ray Humphreys

WITH a fierce scowl Ike threw down his pen, wiped his ink-smeared fingers on his soiled, woolly chaps, and snatched up the piece of hastily scrawled letter paper. He read:

YOU WORTHLESS RUSTLER: This is to inform you, Phil Hughes, that I got your number as a good-for-nothing rustler, and you've been running off my calves for too long to suit me, so I take the law in my own hands and Heaven help you—when we meet, go for your gun, because I intend to plug with a .45 on sight. IKE WARD.

Grunting, Ike folded the challenge deliberately and then reached for a "Shawnee Cattle Company" envelope, place the letter inside, licked the flap, and sealed the envelope.

"I'm sick and plumb disgusted settin' here waitin' for that sheriff to act!" exploded Ike, and he pounded with his huge fist on the freshly sealed envelope. "This'll show that rustler I ain't no dumb-bell like the sheriff—and furthermore, I ain't no sneak. I give him fair warning—I shoots on sight. And Heaven help him—thass all!"

With that off his chest, Ike rose, buttoned the precious letter in his shirt pocket, and, jerking his .45 out of its holster, made for the door. On the threshold he paused and squinted out into the bright morning sunlight. An old tin can twenty yards away attracted his attention. He banged away at it—once, twice, three times—causing the can to roll merrily off.

"That's shooting," commented Ike, giving himself a figurative slap on the back. "I can plug Phil Hughes as easily—even if he does go for his gun first!"

Just the day before, Ike had solved, to his own satisfaction, the mystery of the disappearance of much of his stock. Riding the range back of Old Baldy, on a little-used trail, Ike had come upon Phil Hughes, a neighboring rancher. Hughes was bent over what had been a branding-iron fire. There was a pile of ashes, a few stones black with smoke, and all evidence of a branding party that had been beyond the law. As he watched, Hughes kicked the stones away and mounted his horse, and Ike, wary, pulled his pony back into the timber and allowed Hughes to ride off.

"Too bad I didn't plug him right there," went on Ike, "just like he was that old stump yonder. He was about that far away——"

Ike raised his revolver and pulled the trigger.

There was a slight snap, but no report.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Ike, jerking the gun up under his nose to examine it. "Shucks, I've busted something!"

A minute later, however, he shoved the gun into its holster, and, whistling merrily, he climbed on his patient pony waiting in the shade of the cabin, and thundered off toward Shawnee.

It was a warm day, and the pony slacked its gait at every logical point along the road, but Ike urged it on. He had important business in Shawnee, and the sooner he got there the better.

He swung off outside of "Galloping" McCabe's, the gunsmith, and sauntered in, nodding gaily at McCabe.

"Looky this weapon," said Ike, producing his gun.

"I'll fix it in a few minutes, Ike," said McCabe. "You wanta drop back or set down and wait ten minutes?"

Ike thought for a moment.

"Tell you what," he said, "I'll drop back here pronto," and he went out, whistling, and sauntered up the street. He stalked into the deserted post office and dropped his fateful letter into the mail chute and then ducked out and stood for a moment on the sidewalk. Seeing nobody with whom to pass the time of day, he wended his way back to the gunsmith's. It would be the best of caution, he figured, to stay in close quarters with his shooting iron now, seeing that he had mailed the death challenge to Phil Hughes, who might call for his mail any minute.

"Say," said Galloping as soon as he saw Ike entering, "I'm sure enough grieved, Ike. I guess I was a little too hasty in sayin' what I did. I can't fix this here weapon. You'll have to send it to Denver, and it'll cost you about two dollars, anyway—mebbe two and a quarter."

"Shucks!" exploded Ike. "I need that gun, too. I got a .38 back to the ranch, but I prefer this baby. Gotta send it to Denver, eh?"

"Gotta," confirmed McCabe.

Ike paused and stroked the two-day's beard on his chin and pondered. Yes, he'd better get the gun fixed right away.

"All right, Galloping, send it down to Denver," he ordered finally, "and be sure and tell 'em to rush it. I may need it any day. I got a coyote I have to kill."

"All right," said Galloping. "Say, I can loan you a rifle!"

"Rifle wouldn't do," said Ike; "anyway, I'm in a hurry. Guess I'll go on home—and tell 'em to rush that gun!"

"Sure," said McCabe.

Ike, his mind set on getting home as soon as possible and establishing close relations with his other gun, nevertheless did not care to give Galloping the wrong impression.

"Got two sick calves at home," Ike explained glibly.

"S'long," said McCabe.

Ike thereupon stepped out of the gunsmith's. His pony, at the tie rail, raised inquisitive ears. This usually caused Ike to grin and holler "Yep, it's me!" but Ike didn't grin this time. He didn't see his pony at all. His face blanched, and his knees wobbled a bit; his eyes popped.

Coming out of the post office, and heading right at him, was nobody but Phil Hughes, the man he had just written, offering to shoot him, gratis, on sight. Instinctively Ike's right hand shot toward the empty holster, his fingers itching for the familiar butt that wasn't there. Ike's jaw drooped, and his heart began to thump so hard he feared that it would break through his ribs. Here was a situation he had not figured on.

The fateful line in his letter danced before his dizzy eyes: "When we meet, go for your gun, because I intend to plug you with a .45 on sight!"

He noticed, too, that Phil had his hardware on.

Ike was a quick thinker. Now, face to face with certain death, his mind grasped for an out——

"If I get up as close as I can to the post office," he thought, "if I can get up there, perhaps Phil will be afraid to draw on me in plain sight of somebody who might be there."

Ike strode up the street toward Hughes.

And, just as luck would have it, before the perspiring Ike reached Hughes, old Pete Carr, the sheriff, stepped out of the barber shop. Never did Pete's star look brighter or bigger—or nicer—to Ike than it did right at that moment. The sheriff nodded to Phil, and Phil stopped.

"As long as Pete stays, I'm safe," decided Ike, running a sleeve across his dripping forehead. "Hughes dassent shoot me in plain sight o' the sheriff."

Ike breezed up.

"Well," said the sheriff with a satisfied chuckle, "I got news for you boys. I just put Tequila Joe in jail; figger he's been rustling a lotta cattle offen these ranges——"

"Yes?" asked Ike.

"Yes?" repeated Hughes.

"Yep," said Carr, "got him safe in the hoosegow, where he'll stay until he admits he's guilty!"

The sheriff ambled off.

Ike's face went white again. Once more his fingers itched for the gun that wasn't in his holster. Here he stood, chin to chin with the man he had just challenged to a gun fight, and he had no gun! Undoubtedly Hughes was merely waiting for the sheriff to get out of sight before he began hostilities. Flight, ignominous as it was, perhaps might be the best. Mebbe Hughes wasn't the rustler, but what of that? A challenge was a challenge.

"You know," drawled Hughes, boring Ike with his cool blue eyes, "I sorta suspected you might be mixed up in this rustling, Ike, when nobody around here seemed to know who was guilty—and especially since I found a branding fire over near Baldy only yesterday."

Ike glared back.

"Yes," he exploded, "an' I suspected you, Hughes, and you know it. I stand by every word I——"

Hughes, still watching Ike, reached now for his hip—and Ike, casting ceremony to the four winds, swallowed the rest of his speech, spun on his heel, and fled pell-mell for the tie rack a few yards off. He reached his startled pony in four or five great jumps, somehow got the reins loose, and vaulted into the saddle.

"Hey, Ike!"

But Ike paid no attention. Leaning low over his pony's neck, he stuck his spurs in the flanks and away he went. Just one thought surged through his mind—to get home darn quick, grab his old .38, and turn to do Hughes battle. If Hughes wasn't the rustler, so much the worse; he had challenged Hughes to deadly combat, and an innocent man can be insulted much easier than a rustler. Hughes had already started to draw, anyway.

For the first few jumps of the frenzied horse Ike momentarily expected to hear a report and feel a hot stab of pain in his back—but no! There was no report, no hot stab of pain.

Up the road went Ike at breakneck speed.

A quarter mile—a half mile—why, if he had this pony at the Monte Vista rodeo he could cop off all the prizes—Ike's mind began to clear. He straightened in his saddle and took a hasty glance over his shoulder. Sure enough, a horseman was in pursuit. Through the dust Ike couldn't make out the rider.

"It's Hughes," he told his pony, his lips almost at the horse's ears. "Run, gol durn you, run!"

For another mile the pony kept up the grilling pace. Ike sprawled out along its neck, praying and cussing. He plied quirt and spurs in a desperation that was quite unlike him. The pony re-

sponded, did its best, but gradually—little by little—it began to slacken its speed. Ike did not look back again; there was no need for that, because through the dust screen he could now hear the thunder of the pursuing hoofs, coming louder and louder.

Ike choked a prayer through the perspiration and grime that masked his pale face. "If only I hadn't been so quick to write that letter—so quick to mail it! If only I had my gun, I'd show him I wouldn't run away."

Ike snatched another glance back.

It was Phil Hughes all right. Hughes was shouting at him, too. Ike gave his tired pony a last wallop.

"Ike, you——"

Then out of the dust clouds shot a long, rangy gray, neck bathed in sweat, and the next minute Ike glanced sullenly up into the cool, piercing eyes of Hughes, alongside.

"Stop!" ordered Hughes.

There was no choice. With a curse Ike pulled his jaded pony up on its haunches and slid it to a painfully abrupt stop. Hughes, with more compassion for his animal, carried on a bit and then swung back to face Ike. Again Ike reached for his holster, only to recollect with a groan that it was empty.

Hughes rode up close.

"I got a letter here," he began.

Ike gritted his teeth. Why prolong the misery.

"Well?" grunted Ike.

Hughes gave him a deliberate, keen look.

"You're acting derned peculiar!" exploded Hughes, his brow puckered. "I reach for my handkerchief back there in town, and you jump like a scared jackrabbit, and I have to chase you and your wild cayuse two miles——"

"The letter!" reminded Ike grimly.

"Oh," said Hughes, "just as you blowed, the postmaster come out and yelled at you. But you was traveling too fast to hear him, I guess. He gave me this letter and told me to give it to you. Seems you just mailed it a while back and forgot to address it or put a stamp on it. The envelope had your ranch return address on it, so the postmaster knowed it was yours!"

Ike took the letter and tore it into tiny bits.

"You loco?" demanded Hughes, aghast.

"Never saner in my life," said Ike, with a dazed sigh of relief, and he shook the reins and rode off down the dusty road.

OUTLAW ESCAPES POSSE IN OKLAHOMA

AFTER a daring fight, in which he outwitted a posse of more than one hundred and fifty men, Al Spencer, known as Oklahoma's most daring bandit, made good his escape from a death trap set for him recently in an attempt to bring about his capture. Since the death of the notorious Henry Starr, also of Oklahoma, Spencer has been considered one of the most dangerous bandits of the Southwest. His most recent escapade was the robbery of the State Bank at Mannford, in which he was assisted by two old pals. All three were taken into custody soon after the robbery was committed, but Spencer succeeded in making his escape. A posse had surrounded him in a wooded hill four miles east of Mannford. Just when his capture seemed imminent he made a daring play of gunfire, standing off the posse for a while, and then making good his escape in the direction of Mannford. For years Spencer has terrorized northern Oklahoma by his sudden descents upon country banks. County officials throughout the State have been on his trail in connection with nearly every bank robbery committed during the past five years, but in nearly every instance he managed, by some fluke of luck, to elude his pursuers.

The Bridge

By Mary Imlay Taylor

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

A YOUNG engineer, Duncan Hart, discovers that Jim McCabe, a ferryman, and his henchman, Vrooman, are bent on the destruction of the bridge which Hart is constructing over a river in a wild region of the West.

Hart's affection for Alice Rankin, an Eastern girl, is sorely shaken by Helga Weir, an untamed child of the wilds, daughter of Christian Weir, a celebrated naturalist. Helga is in love with Hart, but when she finds that her father has killed a man called Randall, a detective, whom Alice Rankin's father has sent to spy on Weir, she decides that Hart cannot have anything to do with the daughter of a murderer. Weir refuses to discuss the killing with Helga, and when Hart's bridge is blown up, Helga decides to run away. Heretofore it was impossible to escape the vigilance of her father, who declared he was going to take her with him to Alaska. The blowing up of the bridge destroyed Secret Cañon, the Weir home.

The sight of Alice Rankin clinging to Hart's arm throws Helga into a jealous rage. She was about to attack Alice, when Hart repulses Helga. Now Helga finds the canoe of her Indian nurse and sets out to freedom on the river. Her objective is a railroad station, but the current of the river carries her boat to a rapid falls, and Helga saves herself by clinging to the overhanging branch of a tree, while the angry water foams at her feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RESCUER.

CLINGING to the branch, Helga tore her hands on the rough bark, but she did not know it. She could see the canoe, as it shot the falls, and she felt the rush of the waves on her feet. She tried to drag herself upward, inch by inch, but her strength was failing. The strain on her slender arms was too great, and she knew she could not keep her hold long. The roar of the waters filled her ears. A horrible dizziness seized her, and she tried to look up and not down. There was a mist before her eyes, and she heard nothing now but the ringing like bells in her ears. It seemed to her that the whole world was a flood of roaring water, and that she must sink into it. Her arms ached, the strain was near to breaking them, but still she clung.

She was clinging there, only half conscious; the seconds had seemed hours, the minutes eternity. Then a hand, a human hand—warm and strong—grasped one of her wrists, felt its way down to her shoulder, and she was lifted bodily, dragged shoreward, and sank unconscious into the arms that had saved her.

How long it lasted, a century, an hour, or a second, Helga could never have told. The agony of hanging by her torn and bleeding hands had paralyzed all thought. She was drenched with spray, faint and weak, when she opened her eyes and looked up into the white, drawn face of Duncan Hart. She

was in his arms, and he was looking down at her, with eyes that were dark with emotion.

"Helga, I thought you were dying!" he murmured, and his voice thrilled with a feeling so poignant that it reached through her dimmed consciousness.

She looked up at him weakly, defenselessly; the strain and emotion of these days since the murder of Randall, the death of the squaw and her own flight, had told on the girl. As first her mind wandered; she seemed to grope for remembrance; then her first thought was for him.

"The bridge!" she whispered brokenly. "There's been an explosion. Wenonah is dead. The bridge must have gone!"

She struggled to sit up, and his arms raised her. Her drenched young form lay against his breast, and he could feel her breath on his cheek. Abruptly he knew that it was his bridge that had brought her there on the trail, not Alice, but his bridge! A thrill went through him. This wild young thing loved his bridge!

"It's not all gone, dear Helga; we can save it yet," he said softly, and again his eyes were held by hers, her wonderful blue eyes, where the pupils dilated until they were almost black.

As she lay there, half conscious in his arms, he saw how exquisite were her chin and her lips and her brow. She was white as marble, but she needed no touch of color; she had that perfect loveliness of lines, the splendor of her youth. Involuntarily he touched her bright hair, pushing it away from her wet cheek, and the shining tresses clung to his fingers like golden silk. Her eyes had closed again, the thick bright lashes lay on her white cheek, and it seemed to him she scarcely breathed. As he looked down on her, Hart was shaken; suddenly he felt a physical terror of death touching her, and unconsciously he clasped her close.

"Helga—dear Helga!" The words broke from his lips without his own volition.

They seemed to penetrate her dim consciousness again; she stirred and opened her eyes. This time the shock had passed away, she remembered. With a gasp she looked up at him, and his eyes held hers. A shudder ran through her, and she drew a deep breath. Her soul was leaping up to answer his soul, and young love blazed up for an instant between them. Then a glorious blush stained her white cheeks, she struggled, and he set her free.

"You?" she gasped, her hands clasped against her breast. "You! How did you come here? You must have pulled me out of the tree!"

"I did, thank God!" he said gravely. "I'd been down to the junction with the sheriff; we've arrested McCabe for the bridge explosion, though he denies his guilt. I was coming back on horseback, and I stopped to look over at the cataract. Your canoe was coming, Helga, and I saw it. I did not know you then, but I got off my horse and came down to see if I could do anything, and then you caught at that limb. It was wonderful. I never saw anything like it, Helga." He drew his breath sharply.

She was blushing now, and her eyes were dark under their long lashes. She looked at her hands.

"They're bleeding. I must go and wash them in the water. I——" She struggled and looked up gravely. "The wild cat thanks you for her life, Mr. Hart."

"Helga!"

The rush of feeling that had swept him when she was so near death, had broken down the barriers; he remembered that her knife thrust had saved him from Vrooman, and he remembered, too, the tender emotion in her voice when she cried: "I thought he'd kill you, and if he did—I knew I couldn't live!"

A sweet madness beat in his brain, his eyes were shining.

"Helga!" he said again.

She did not answer him; she went to the edge of the rapids, knelt down on a rock, and bathed her bleeding hands. Something in her very attitude forbade him to come near her. He could not see her face, but he saw that the blush that had risen there had reached her ears and the nape of her neck. She drooped low over the water, laving the lacerated flesh, not looking back at him.

He came a step nearer.

"Helga," he said softly, "where were you going? The river is dangerous, and you were alone! Will you tell me where you were going?"

She shook her head. "No! Why should I? I——" She rose slowly to her feet, her wide eyes calm now, the blush fading. "I'm sorry I spoke so to her—that I frightened her. I know you—you love her!"

He stood still, returning her look; he was dumb. He had utterly forgotten Alice, and suddenly now he realized it. He had asked Alice to be his wife! And this girl, this wild, beautiful creature, was the daughter of a man who had killed, who boasted he had killed another. The thought of it went through his mind like a bullet; it stunned him. He stool still. They looked at each other, and neither of them spoke, but Hart was aware that he was shaking from head to foot. He had saved her; he had held her in his arms; her soft wet cheek had touched his; he had known the terror of death for her, and the scales had fallen from his eyes. But he had asked Alice to be his wife, and she had not refused him. In honor he was bound. In honor he must remember Helga's father was no more than a common murderer. But what man can remember these things when he loves? The force of it was like the tide sweeping down the great river, leaping and foaming on those black rocks, plunging in a cataract over the ledge. And he was sure she loved him. The thought intoxicated him and turned his brain; even the wreck of his beautiful bridge sank out of sight.

"Helga," he said in a smothered voice, "tell me—is there anything wrong? Does anything trouble you? Has that brute Vrooman——"

She looked over her shoulder, and her lips were white, but her eyes were dark and clear. "Vrooman is threatening your life," she answered; "I meant to tell you. He says he'll kill you, and he's dangerous."

"I know!" said Hart quickly, his eyes like steel. "He's been plaguing you again, and because of that he's threatening me. I know, Helga!" He came nearer, standing beside her, looking down at her beautiful golden head. "Is it because of him you're running away? Because"—he spoke quietly, his face whitening a little, his eyes dark—"if it's that I'll kill him."

The girl sprang to her feet with a shudder. "No!" she cried wildly; "no, not for my sake. I want no more lives on my head!"

She was trembling, and her beautiful face was like a white mask; her eyes looked not blue, but black. She was so fair, so lovely. The water still dripping from her drenched clothing and her hair, she might well have been taken for Undine, risen not from the fountain, but from the cataract, bathed in spray and in sunshine.

"One man has died because of me, but not another, Duncan Hart, not another, as long as I live!" she sobbed.

"Helga!" he caught her hands and held them, looking deep into her eyes, his own shining. "Helga, I think a man might be glad to die for your sake!" he cried.

She did not answer; her white face was like chiseled marble; only in her beautiful eyes came a look he could not

fathom, but it was not love; it was something deeper, more poignant, and it dazzled him. "Helga," he breathed softly, drawing her closer, "don't look at me like that. I can't bear it, for I love you!"

She wrenched her hands away, and sudden fury blazed in her eyes.

"Have you said that before? I think you have—and to her!" she stormed. "To her—and now to me! I—I don't want such love, Duncan Hart. I wouldn't take it—it's hers. I——" Her hands were clasped against her heart, and she laughed hysterically, brokenly. "I'm a wild cat!" she cried.

"You're like a child, Helga," he retorted, his face flushing. "You can't understand. You're a wild cat, yes, but you're something more—you're the loveliest creature God ever made, and there's no power on earth that ever can drive a man's love and chain it. Helga, I believe you love me, too!"

"If I did—after that, after I saw you with her I'd"—she drew a fierce breath—"I'd tear it out of my heart and stamp on it! You're hers; go back to her!" She was trembling, but her scorn was glorious. "You've asked *her* to marry you, but for me—you have this!"

As she spoke, she flung her shining hair back on her shoulders and leaped away from him, nearer the river. The spray of it was on her, on her face, on her hair, and her eyes were aflame.

"I don't want your love, Duncan Hart!" she cried, still choking and panting. "Take it back to her!"

He stood before her with bowed head. Suddenly he saw how his love-making must seem to her—just as if he tossed her the crumbs that had fallen from Alice's hands. She was honest, like a child, or a mountain-bred woman, she saw no two ways to anything; she knew nothing of broken troths, or of love's short day. With her it was life and eternity, like the great hills, and the deep cañons behind her, like the unchained river at their feet. She had loved him, he was sure of it, and she had fought for his life with Vrooman, and he had not answered that love. She had seen him with Alice; she would never accept Alice's lover, any more than she would take Alice's husband; she had a soul like a pure white flame. Once, for a moment, it had touched him gloriously, but he had failed her. Now there was nothing between them but the white ashes of that first love for him. But the thought maddened him. He tried to overtake her, as she ran up the bed of the river, stumbling now and then on the broken stone and slate under her feet.

"Helga!" he called her again, and this time his voice shook with emotion, and he could not make it reach her above the cataract.

"Helga!"

She never looked back. She had found the trail up the sheer wall at her side. She was climbing swiftly, surely; he could see her young figure now outlined against the sky above him. Then he saw her stop a moment and put out her hands blindly. Something had stunned her, had stayed her flight from him. He ran up the rock ledge, leaping from point to point, looking upward. But he had not reached her when he saw the tall figure of Weir on the trail. Weir was coming toward her. Hart remembered now that Weir had been at the railroad. He had had a glimpse of him riding away, and he had thought of Rankin's eagerness to see him. He thought of it now, as he saw the two outlined above him. For an instant it seemed to him that Helga drew back, cowered away from her father; then he saw Christian Weir take her in his arms, as a man takes a child, and carry her over the edge of the cliff. They were outlined again against the sky; then the two figures disappeared.

Hart stood still, rooted to the ground,

thinking. Weir must have followed him. Did he know about the canoe and the river? Had he come there after the girl, or was he bent on escaping Rankin? Something in Helga's attitude, in that moment when she came face to face with her father, sent a thrill of uneasiness through Duncan Hart. He remembered the pictured woman in Rankin's hands, and the face was the face of Helga Weir. Was he right to keep his knowledge from Rankin? Then the thought of that hunter of men loosed on the trail of Weir drove the blood to his heart. For Weir was Helga's father.

The roar of the cataract did not hush the tumult of his own heart. He thought of her, as she lay in his arms, of her lovely unconscious face, of that moment when he had reached for her, hardly daring to hope to save her. The thought of her, of her wet cheek against his, sent a thrill of that new, sweet madness through him.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE AMBUSH.

IT seemed a long time to Duncan Hart, but it was scarcely twenty minutes that he stood thus, beside the river, struggling with his own heart. He had thought himself a strong man; now he knew his own weakness. He had opened his heart to the floodtide of this new love, and he could not shut it out again. Neither honor nor dishonor, life nor death, made any difference. A deep, overmastering force had taken possession of his soul. Alice passed before it like a shadow, yet in honor he was bound to await her answer.

Her answer? And it meant nothing to him any more! The sight of Weir had sent a shock through him, but it did not turn him. Helga was innocent; Helga could not be made to suffer for her father.

He drew a deep breath, thinking of Helga; he knew now that he loved her. She had driven him away, but he believed she still loved him, as she had loved him when she thrust a knife into Vrooman to save him. He had seen it in her eyes then. The blaze of it had dazzled him, but now he knew that his own heart had been kindled at the same torch. If things went wrong with him, if Alice Rankin held him to his word, as a man of honor he *must* keep that word! But his life would be a hell, if he did, the hell of a man married to one woman and loving another with all his heart and his soul. He had seen that hell more than once, and the end of it was misery! He thought of it, and his eyes went to the gnarled branch where Helga had been suspended by her arms. The thought of her so near death, her white uplifted face, the rapids beating upon her, sent a shrill of anguish through him. He could not look at it again; he turned and followed the trail up the sheer red rock of the cañon wall.

In the pass above he had left his horse. The animal had wandered a little in its grazing, but Hart caught it and mounted. He must go back to his bridge. Already the repair work had begun to show the stupidity of the intended blast. The black powder and dynamite had been put too far back in the rock ledge; due, perhaps, to the watch on the bridge. But the blast had shaken the long ridge and tumbled it into new bold shapes. Even at a great distance, Hart could see some of the changes in it; as yet he knew nothing of the crumbling of the entrance to Secret Canyon.

Looking far ahead he saw Weir and Helga descending between two great boulders. They were going toward the ferryhouse, of course, to cross over. Weir was on foot, leading his horse. Helga rode it, and Hart could see, far off as it was, the sunshine on her golden hair. But there was something in the very attitude of her figure that was

pathetic; she drooped in the saddle. They were, perhaps, half a mile ahead of him now, and Hart drew rein and fumbled in his pocket for his field glasses. He could sit here on his horse and watch her, as they slowly descended the pass into the basin, where the ferry crossed, three miles above him.

Here he could see Weir's horse, a splendid animal, climbing slowly down. They were between red boulders and cream-colored broken rocks; the trail was green. Here and there a silver scale plant showed white against the red rocks. Above the cloudless sky was gloriously blue. He could see Weir's great figure moving deliberately, his hand on the horse's bridle. Helga was drooping; once she put her hand out and seemed to plead with her father. Twice she swayed in the saddle.

There was a dense group of cedars behind them, at the side of the pass. As they went slowly around a curve and disappeared, Hart's hand tightened on his glasses. A man had come out of the cedars, leading a gray horse. He mounted quickly and rode up to the head of the trail. From that vantage point he must command a view of the two descending. Hart swept the man and the horse, with keen eyes, and he knew them both. It was Vrooman on McCabe's gray.

For a long moment Hart stared at the two, man and horse, then both disappeared over the edge of the pass. Did Vrooman plan to murder Weir and seize Helga? The thought sent the blood pounding into Hart's brain. The roar of the cataract here, echoing against the great cliffs of the cañon, rolling back against the mountains beyond, deafened him. He could not have heard a rifle shot a hundred yards away. He could not have heard Helga scream. He thrust his hand into his pocket and felt for his automatic. Now he urged his horse forward, but the trail was bad for a quarter of a mile. There were broken stones and split rock. It had been an old Indian trail, leading back to the mesa behind the great bridge; but it had been little used of late. Once his horse stumbled and almost fell; twice he slipped, and stones rolled, crashing over the edge of the cliffs into the river below. But Hart urged him on. In another fifty yards they came to the grassy valley of the pass, where he had watched Weir leading Helga's mount. Over this Hart galloped. Before him, through a narrow defile, the shadows of the great rocks made it twilight. It was so narrow that he had to ride slowly, letting his horse feel his way. It opened at the farther end like a trumpet, flaring wide; below it the pass widened into a basin. Here was another group of cedars, where the sunlight made dense shadows, and the trail divided. There was a path to the right and one to the left. Which had they taken?

Hart swung out of the saddle and looked for hoofmarks; he found them. One horse had gone to the right and one to the left! In a moment he understood. Vrooman had gone to the left! It was the shorter curve, and he would meet Helga and her father face to face in the basin, a mile and a half from the ferry, the loneliest spot on the trail. Hart swung back into his saddle and turned to the left. As he rode, his brain worked rapidly. Vrooman had not been following Helga, and he had hardly been following Weir, unless he meant to get him out of the way. It was more likely that he had been waiting there for Hart himself, meaning to shoot him down, as he passed the cedars. McCabe had sworn that Vrooman had carried the dynamite up the pass, night after night, until the ledge was primed; that it was Vrooman who lit the fuse, when the men went off to their dinner. He had only partially succeeded at the bridge, and Helga said he meant to kill him. Hart smiled grimly. This time they would meet on fair terms. Vrooman

had gone after Helga instead of waiting for his prey, and his prey was behind him now and armed!

In that moment of fierce anger at Vrooman for daring to look at Helga, Hart's brain was on fire, and he had only one impulse—the desire to kill—to kill the big brute for his pursuit of the girl! Then, as he rode, he laughed bitterly. He had thought of Weir as a murderer. Would he blame himself now if he shot Vrooman?

His horse was galloping madly; there was only this growth of old gnarled cedars to shield the view down the trail: in a moment he would turn it. He must have gained on them; they had only been half a mile or more ahead of him, and Weir was walking, leading the horse. Vrooman's gray was a good racer; so was Hart's black. He struck his spur into the animal's flank and shot ahead. Presently Hart emerged from the cedars and saw the whole basin stretched at his feet, green as an emerald. The sight was beautiful. The grassy bottom, the roughhewn rocks piled up around it; behind it the lips of the cañons, opening into the sides of the mountains; and over the lower mountains was one great peak, snow-capped against the sky. For an instant, emerging from the shadow, the sunlight dazzled him; then he saw three figures below him on the grassy trail. Weir was holding the horse that Helga was riding, and Vrooman was before them, still on his gray. Hart could see Helga's pale profile; her eyes were on Vrooman, and Weir stood like a statue.

The big brute meant to kill Helga's father, her only protector! Quick as the thought came to him, Hart saw the spurt of flame from the pistol in Vrooman's hand, and he thought Weir was hit; for his hand fell from the bridle, and Helga's horse, startled by the shot, careered to one side. The sound of the report stung Hart into action. The safety on his own automatic clicked, and without thought he fired. If Vrooman heard him he would know he had one more man to deal with beside Weir, and he galloped down the long slope like a madman.

Vrooman did hear the shot; he turned, saw Hart coming, and dropped from his horse. Hart thought he meant to settle with Weir first, but he did not; he leaped for the bridle of Helga's horse. In a flash Hart saw what he had planned. He meant to mount behind her and strike for the other end of the valley, using her for a shield; Neither he nor Weir could shoot then without risking Helga's life. Why did not Weir fire? Was he unarmed? Hart had no time to find an answer to that, as he drove his spur into his horse, and like a thunderbolt the big black tore down the trail, and Hart fired again and missed! But Vrooman had no time to reach Helga; she had turned her horse out of his way, behind her father. Weir had not moved, but, as Vrooman turned, he suddenly seized the gray and mounted. As he did it, he got Helga's bridle again, and the two horses started madly, plunging and kicking toward the valley.

Vrooman, alone and on foot, faced Hart. For the fraction of a second, Hart's pulses leaped. He had Helga's tormentor at his mercy. Then a bullet sang past his ear, and Vrooman leaped behind a low growth of cedars. Hart drove his horse right at them and sent three shots into their dense shadows; then he leaped down. Vrooman was hiding; he wanted a hand to hand fight. He should have it!

Hart circled the cedars and found no one. They were grouped against a wall of red limestone. He stood rooted to the spot in amazement. Then he saw an old waterhole. Above it was a low natural arch. Vrooman must be crouching there to get him, as he stepped out into the light. Hart could not see into it without making himself an easy tar-

get, and he had only seven of his eleven shots left. But he stooped and sent one obliquely under the arch. He heard it splinter rock and rebound. The echo was sharp, but there was no other reply. He stepped back, his eyes on the rocks, looking to see if Vrooman had slipped around the cedars and was coming on him from behind. But his own horse was quietly cropping grass. He glanced back and saw Weir still on the gray and Helga on Weir's horse, riding over the long trail. It seemed to him that Helga looked back, but they were already a hundred and fifty yards away.

Stepping farther back, his automatic still in his hand, he scanned the rocks and the wild trail that led back to the mountains. Suddenly he saw the figure of a man leaping up the rocks far to the south; he was already out of range and going as only a mountaineer could go. It was Vrooman! There must have been an outlet to the arch, and he had gone through it and taken to the rocks behind it.

Dumb with amazement, Hart stared. The man was brave; he was a fighter; he was armed. Why had he taken to his heels? And why had Weir failed to fire a shot at him? That there could be any collusion between the two was impossible, for Vrooman had just tried to kill Weir. It might be that Weir was unarmed. It seemed profoundly unlikely, but it might be.

Hart stood a moment longer, watching Vrooman leaping like a mountain goat from cliff to cliff. He could see him a long way off, until he grew smaller and smaller, and his dun-colored clothing began to blend with the rocks he was scaling. Then Hart mounted and rode down into the valley. It was empty; Weir and Helga had long since disappeared into the rocky defile that led into another basin. Hart rode slowly; he had no thought of overtaking them. His own mind was in a tumult. Things that had seemed impossible had come true; the weight of Helga's unconscious body on his breast, the touch of her sweet wet cheek on his, had unloosed the pagan in him. He no longer thought of honor or ambition, or even of his bridge. At that moment he was willing to sacrifice them all for the touch of one woman's lips.

The little valley was dropping into twilight, but the sides of the bare mountains and the great snow-capped peak were splendidly bathed in sunlight. It might be said that, as the earth sank into shadow, the glory of God shone on the hills! Hart could hear the sullen voice of his river, but he scarcely heeded it, he was thinking of that horrible moment when he had seen Helga's canoe approaching the falls. He had returned from the junction on the river trail; some impulse, a fancy to see the wild tumult of the cataract, had made him go to the edge, and he had seen the canoe shoot the falls. Then he saw her, her shining hair and her uplifted white face. She was hanging by her arms, and her strength was failing. He scarcely knew how he had reached that tree, climbed into it, and reached for her with one hand! In the nearness of death he had felt the thrill of new life. He had a feeling of exultation; it seemed as if the primal facts of existence, the mighty forces of nature, had grasped him and tossed him like a chip into the torrent of life. In the savage joy he felt when he had saved her, he might have been a caveman who had found his woman.

A strange buoyancy possessed him; he knew it was madness, but she had come to possess his whole being. The sweet clear air cooled his hot cheek; he felt for his automatic and remembered how he had tried again to kill Vrooman. Surely he had gone mad. A few months ago in the East he would have called it border murder! He had come out here with only the beautiful dream of his bridge spanning the river from rock wall to rock wall, binding together two

railroads, opening the way for civilization, and his reward was to have been fame and Alice Rankin's love! The thought chilled him; he could never feel the same toward her again. There was something exquisite and precious about her; she belonged to the hothouse flowers of life, but she would never love any man well enough to fight for him, or to die for him, and he had seen the splendid blaze of it in Helga's eyes.

His hand tightened on his horse's rein, as he looked up at the sunlight that flooded the mountaintops. He felt the grandeur of it, the freedom of desert places. The call was in his blood, and Helga, not Alice, had answered it.

As he rode out of the valley and through the defile, where Weir had ridden with her, he tried to find some trace of them. But there was none. He could see the hoofmarks of their horses in one bare bit of soil; then the broken rock and slate filled in the open spaces. He could only fancy that they had turned aside to the ferry. It was still in use; he had obtained the sheriff's consent to running it with a part of the bridge crew, and he knew that Yancy had shipped over some material for the work of repair on the broken span. At the thought his hand clenched. It was Vrooman who had tried to destroy his work; he was sure of it now. McCabe had told the truth—it was with Vrooman that he had yet to settle.

The big boat was at the ferry, and he found one of the bridge workers ready to take him and his horse across. It was now late afternoon; in half an hour the sun would depart from the mountain-tops, and a sweet twilight would fall over the cañon, and there would be no sound but the mighty voice of his river. He dismounted and led his horse up the trail to his cabin. Alice was still using it, and he and Rankin slept in tents near by. As he ascended, he saw them, and Alice waved to him, her exquisitively gowned figure outlined against the firs. But Hart's eyes were not on her, but on Rankin. The elder man was talking to a ragged small figure that Hart knew at once as Jimmy McCann. And in Rankin's hand was the white sheet of an open letter. There was excitement in his very attitude; he was cross-examining the boy, and suddenly Hart felt an inexplicable dread. The whole air of the man was triumphant, the victorious look of a hunter of men who has hunted well.

The exultation of a moment before turned to sharp apprehension. McCann carried mail to the station often, and McCann's boy had brought the letter. Was it the missing letter that Randall had never sent? Slowly, almost reluctantly, Hart ascended the trail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BURIED SECRETS.

ALICE was the first to speak; Rankin was paying and dismissing Jimmy McCann.

"You're late, Duncan," she said lightly, her eyes searching his face, and a dimple showing suddenly in her cheek. "I was afraid you'd met a wild cat on the trail," she added wickedly, a glint of laughter in her face.

Hart reddened, partly with anger. He knew she was trying to provoke him about Helga. In no other way had she referred to that tense moment when he found her dizzy and crying at the edge of the chasm, and Helga driving her with the fury of her look. Not even now did he know what had passed between the two girls, but he knew that Alice had stored it away in her memory for another time. In a hundred little ways she had shown that.

"I went over to the junction with the sheriff and McCabe," he replied briefly. "The latter is still accusing me of making away with your father's detective. I may land in jail yet."

As he said it, Rankin turned with a

flush on his broad, middle-aged face. He clapped his hand on Hart's shoulder.

"You won't if we find our quarry!" he exclaimed heartily. "I've got poor Randall's last letter. He wrote it just before he went to see this man, Weir, in Secret Cañon. Where in thunder is that hidden cañon, Duncan?"

The flush died out of Hart's face and left it pale. He turned suddenly, sharply on Rankin.

"What do you want of Weir?" he demanded.

Rankin laughed harshly. "I want to ask him a few questions, Duncan, just a few. Alice tells me she's seen his daughter, and she's like the photograph I showed you!" He added this slowly, his keen eyes fixed on the young engineer's set face.

For a moment Hart did not answer, and Alice, watching him demurely, spoke softly:

"Papa, she's prettier than the picture, but she is like it. Ask Duncan if she isn't."

Hart bruskly turned again on Rankin. "What do you want of Weir, sir?"

Rankin was still smiling at him across the letter in his hand. He tapped it as he answered:

"I want to know where Randall is—perhaps he'll tell us—for one thing; and I want to talk to the man himself. Where's Secret Cañon? Got any idea, Duncan? I'm going to find out!"

Hart's eyes passed beyond him to the gnarled cedar at the edge of the cañon. Twilight had dropped below it like a veil, the mountains were dark now, great masses of rock, incongruous, darkly colored, while the afterglow caught in glory on the snow-capped peak. It was a long moment before he answered.

"I hear it's no longer secret," he said with difficulty. "That explosion—in the side wall of the bridge shook the ridge through which it runs to the mountains over there. It crumbled the loose rock out of the only mouth of the little cañon, where Weir has lived for years. I have not been there. McCann told me over at the junction. I believe the Indian woman who has served them for years was crushed by the fall of rock."

"How terrible!" Alice turned pale. "Oh, Duncan, I think it's a horrible place, and it frightens me—all this mass of rock, these wild mountains! I feel as if they were going to fall on top of me and suffocate me. I believe I'll be crushed before I can get away!"

Hart smiled; involuntarily he put out his hand, and she slipped hers into it. As she did it, she raised half-laughing, half-serious eyes to his.

"If I marry you, Duncan," she whispered, "you'll have to give this all up. I won't live near such a place!"

Her words were a shock to him. He started, and the red stained his cheeks. But he did not have time to reply, for Rankin broke in.

"If you won't guide me, I'll go myself," he declared with a tone of triumph in his thick voice. "I'm going; you and Alice can get supper. I'll lay this fellow by the heels before I eat, or my name isn't Rankin!"

As he spoke, he thrust the open letter into his pocket and started down the trail.

"I've got to go with him, Alice," Hart said to her; "it's not far; we'll be back soon. You're not afraid in the cabin?"

She searched his face. "You're afraid papa is going to hurt that girl's father!" she exclaimed.

Hart smiled, and Alice had never seen him smile like that before—it was like the flash of steel in his gray eyes. "I'm more afraid he'll hurt your father," he retorted dryly.

"If he's like his daughter——" Alice began.

But Hart did not hear her; he ran down the trail after Rankin and overtook him halfway to the ferry. For a stout man the lawyer had traveled fast.

"It's a bad time to go, Mr. Rankin," Hart said quickly; "it will be almost dark in the cañon, and the moon doesn't get over the mountains for half an hour."

Rankin was puffing from his exertion, but he still had that curiously excited look on his usually heavy face.

"I'm going now," he said briefly. "If you don't want to guide me you needn't!" he added with a touch of rancor.

"I'm going with you," he replied.

Hart had a feeling that something portentous was impending for Helga. If his presence could shield her, could keep Weir from fresh violence, he would be there. But he was sure, from Rankin's very reticence, that there was something important against the eccentric naturalist, and he feared most of all the meeting between the two men, for he knew Rankin was habitually unarmed. He remembered Weir's face when he said he had killed Randall; he knew the man felt justified by some unwritten law. But it was not for the death of the detective that Rankin was seeking him. Rankin was too big a man at the bar to waste his time over the death of an insignificant person, even if he had employed him. He would have sent others to avenge Randall; it was something deeper, more dangerous, that had brought him out here—something that would pay him a larger fee! Hart knew it; the thought stung him.

In the vastness of those darkening mountains, in the marvelous jumble of rock walls and lovely green basins and water holes, beside the mighty, ever-changing, sullen river, such things seemed cruel and sordid. He glanced sideways at Rankin, as they crossed the ferry; the lights in the old boat shone on his fleshy, self-satisfied face; he belonged to the horde of successful men, the magnates of the world's market places. Hart doubted if he had a soul to feel the inexpressible grandeur of that wild scene, of the darkening earth, and the whitening sky. The moon was rising somewhere behind the long mountain range, and the sky looked like a huge, inverted silver bowl.

On the farther side they went swiftly. Rankin was silent, panting a little, as they ascended the trail by the creek which Hart and Helga had followed. He seemed little disposed to confide his errand, and Hart was busily engaged in looking for the break that McCann had described. As they came nearer to the noisy creek, looking dark now between broken walls, he knew that the gate must be near. Helga had, of course, gone through it that night. It was twilight, but the twilight of moonrise. He could see the great rocky ridge that ran horizontically away from his bridge. Somewhere behind it was the pocket cañon that had been actually hidden away by some earlier convulsion of nature, or the work of those Indians who had inhabited the ancient mesa.

As they reached the apparent end of the trail, Rankin stood still. "Know where you are, Duncan?"

The moon was just rising over the dark shoulder of a mountain, and it flooded the scene with a weird, translucent light. Hart pointed silently at a strange break in the rock wall before them. Two cliffs stood on either side, and between them a mass of crumbled rocks had rolled out into the creek, turning part of its current into the pass. Nothing could have been more ghostly or more forbidding than those two sentinels of darkred limestone, looking purple now in the moonlight, and between them the jumbled, crushed and scattered masses of the fallen arch. Rankin still stood, motionless, and his breath came more heavily now; he was staring at the spot with a look of repugnance.

"Good heavens, Hart, it looks like the mouth of a tomb. I'd expect to find mummies in there!"

"You'll probably find an exquisitely fertile little valley, shut in by these walls and sheltered. I've found little paradises in the rock walls over by Navajo Mountain, where I took the trail once. Weir told me he'd lived here for years. You'll find it rough traveling to get through there," he added quietly; "it's broken rock and slate probably, and the creek's partly turned into it. Want to try it at night, Mr. Rankin?"

For answer Rankin strode forward, his broad, thick figure standing out in great bulk in the moonlight. He was not used to rough walking, but he climbed over the débris with the fierce determination of a hunter close on the trail of his quarry. Hart saw it, as he followed, and he felt again a keen antipathy. This man would have no mercy. Had Randall, his hireling and tool, been like him? Vaguely Hart could picture Weir's terrible wrath, his swift retaliation. He might be leading in another tragedy now, but he was going to do his best to avert it.

Then, as he followed the lawyer over the rough pass, he entered the broken gateway and stood for the first time, in Secret Cañon. Involuntarily both men stood still, and Rankin uttered an exclamation of surprise. The moonlight flooded the little valley; its sheer walls were softly pink, its cedars and its pines etched black against the silvery light. Far off the waters of the little lake gleamed through the trees. Before them was a huge boulder, buried deep in the earth, and at its foot was a half finished Indian basket, full of flowers. Hart looked up at the rock and saw words chiseled into the rough stone. "A faithful Indian woman lies buried here."

He knew that Helga had filled the basket with flowers, but they were faded. Something in that made his heart suddenly stand still. Where was the girl? His quick glance followed the trail, white in the moonlight, and he caught the outlines of the cabin. It was dark.

Rankin was staring about him, bewildered.

"How long did you say this—this writer fellow claims to have lived here?" he asked harshly, as if something choked him.

"His daughter told me she had known no other place for fifteen years," Hart answered soberly. "It's lonely, but it's beautiful!" he added below his breath.

Rankin groaned. "To shut a girl up here! The man's mad, and I always said so!"

Hart turned quickly. "You've known him before?"

"Yes, I've known him. I've got to see him now. There's the shack. I see it! Don't believe in gas around here, do they?"

Hart went with him. If he could not save Helga from this trouble, he would do what he could to avert it. But the darkness of the cabin alarmed him. He looked up at the trail, showing against the sheer side of the cañon wall. "She killed her timber wolf there," he thought, and then the delicate perfume of flowers came to him. They had entered Helga's garden. Hart glanced at it dreamily; he was picturing the girl's life here; she had lived near to the heart of things. But Rankin was already pounding on the cabin door. There was no response except the weird echo against the rock walls that surrounded them.

"They can't be in bed," said the lawyer testily. "Shout, Hart, and rouse 'em, I've got to see him!"

"They're not here," Hart replied quietly, with a feeling of relief. "They must have left the cañon after the wall fell."

"Not here? They must be!" Rankin shook the door frantically, and it gave under his hand and swung softly inward.

The cabin was dark, but the moonlight shone weirdly through the uncurtained windows. It threw deep shadows

in the corners, it fell white and ghostly across the table where Weir's books still lay.

"Good heavens, he's given me the slip again!" cried Rankin, "or he's hiding. Strike a light, can't you?"

Hart was fumbling in his pocket for a match. Its feeble light showed him a lamp on the table, and he lit it. The room had been only partially dismantled, but everywhere there was evidence of a hasty departure. Rankin, deeply excited now, found a candle, lit it and pushed on into the other rooms. Hart did not follow him; Helga's presence seemed to pervade the place, and the lawyer's eager search was a sacrilege. Satisfied that they were gone, he turned and went out into the garden. The exultation of that moment when he had held her in his arms, was past. He felt an exquisite sadness. The moonlight made her valley beautiful as fairyland, and she had lived here like a prisoner! He looked up at the grim walls, so like a rampart, and beheld the sky. No wonder that she had seemed a creature of another existence; she had lived here in the presence of things beautiful, primal, eternal.

Walking through the garden he went down into the valley. It was still, but not deserted. A rabbit darted across the trail once, and he came upon a little burro grazing quietly. On his neck hung a card, fastened by a cord. Hart read it in the moonlight, and the writing was that of a woman. "Be kind to me. I'm Helga's. My name it Tonto."

Hart experienced again that feeling of physical suffocation. Helga had gone, and she had gone unwillingly. That message on Tonto's neck spoke of a girl unhappy for her pets, friendless and helpless to protect them. He put his hand on the little burro's head and patted it. Tonto should not lack a friend. Then suddenly he heard Rankin's shout from the lake. The voice echoed jubilantly triumphant.

"Hello, Duncan!" Rankin's shout guided him. He saw the lawyer standing on the farther side of the little lake, a large dark figure in the moonlight.

He was waving both hands, as Hart came up.

"Hey, Duncan, I've found it—a new grave!" he cried gleefully. "Get a pick. There must be one at the cabin. We'll find Randall here!"

Hart stood still. "Why do you think it's a grave?" he asked, a feeling of revulsion seizing him. "Did Weir murder and bury here—like a bandit?"

"I don't think—I know," cried Rankin. "I've got the poor old boy's letter. He knew this Weir was Fred Corey, and Randall was after him. Corey killed him. I've got Corey now, by George!"

A chill shot through Hart; he put his hand on the sapling, where Helga had leaned before him. "Tell me," he said hoarsely, "what has this man done? Why do you pursue him and his young daughter? I must know, Rankin!"

Rankin stared at him. "His daughter? If I'm right, she's not his daughter. Her father died in New York three weeks ago. He's been hunting her for fifteen years!"

CHAPTER XIX.

PURSUIT.

"NOT his daughter?" Hart stared at Rankin, his face suddenly white in the moonlight.

"No!" snapped Rankin; "if this man's Corey, and Randall says in this last letter that he is, and I saw the likeness—that was what I saw, confounded fool that I am, when he was in your cabin—then this girl isn't his, but a girl I've been looking for since she was three years old. Now, are you satisfied? Let us get a shovel or something. If I find Randall here, that's proof enough, isn't it? A man doesn't kill another for nothing!"

Hart drew a long breath; he knew that Weir had killed Randall. Then the thought of Helga brought back the plaintive little appeal on the burro's neck. Had this wild man, Weir, carried the girl off against her will?

Without a word he went back to the cabin, and near it he found Weir's garden tools and returned with them. The moonlight on the little lake showed every tree and low-growing bush against it. He walked through a group of cedars that were touched with silver, a wonderful light showed him the broken stones on the grave and the faded flowers. At the sight of them he started. Helga had strewn them there. Did she know? Was that the new look he had seen in her eyes, the look of fear? Rankin was not disposed to tell him the story, he saw that. The lawyer was testy, excited, like a hound on the trail of a fox. He seized one of the tools, a spade, and began to help to open the ground. Neither of them spoke, and both were breathing hard. There was no sound but the pick and spade, except once, when the little burro came down to the lake to drink and started the pebbles rolling along the opposite shore. The grave was shallow, and, once it was opened, Hart turned away in disgust. He left Rankin to do the work of searching for his proofs. He knew what lay under that Indian blanket, and again he felt that keen, shuddering disgust of Weir. He remembered Randall; there was a certain kindness back of the man's shrewdness. He could fancy that he had often held his knowledge back in pity, or lightened the charge against a first offender.

He left the lawyer over the open grave and crossed to the other side of the lake. Unconsciously he stumbled into Helga's garden, and the fragrance of the heliotrope stole into his senses. The sweetness of it, on such a night, was like the touch of the girl's wet cheek on his. He stood still, looking down at the flowerbeds. How she had tended them! Intuitively he knew that she had, for no other hands could have trained these dainty blossoms. And she had never been far from her cañon. How had she learned of heliotrope, of mignonette, of lemon verbena? He was staring down at the flowers, clear cut in the moonlight, when he heard Rankin's shout again. He turned reluctantly and saw the stout figure coming toward him with incredible speed.

"Quick, Duncan, let's get that lamp! It hasn't gone out, has it?" he added anxiously.

Hart shook his head; through the open door he could see Weir's lamp shining on the long shelves that still held many of his wellworn volumes. Rankin came up, panting.

"It's Randall all right," he said excitedly, "and I've got two photographs out of his pocket—and his note book. The fool buried the evidence on his victim. I'm going to get a good look at these under the lamp. I believe I've got the girl I'm looking for!" he added, hurrying toward the cabin.

Hart followed him; almost wholly against his own will, the thing drew him. He must know the worst—or the best of it. If Helga was not Weir's daughter, who was she? How came she there—in the hidden cañon?

Rankin was at the table, holding two stained photographs under the lamp, and he was chuckling. A man who had just searched a corpse! This time Hart felt a disgust of him, stronger than his disgust of the murder itself. But Rankin broke out joyously.

"Just as I thought—look at 'em! The same little girl, isn't it?"

He thrust the pictures under Hart's eyes, his finger shaking, as he pointed to the inscriptions under each. On one, in the dress of a petted child of fortune, was written: "Helga Brand, three years old." On the other, the same child appeared in the rough, warm

clothing of a frontier baby, and beneath, in a man's writing: "Helga Weir, three years and three months."

"Three months didn't make much difference," Rankin exulted. "I've got the trail now, and I'm going to get him hung for murder!"

Hart dropped the pictures on the table and looked straight across into Rankin's eyes, his own flashing.

"If Helga is not his daughter, how did she come here? What's the story, Rankin? I've got to know!" he said in a low, strained voice.

Rankin pocketed the pictures. "I can't tell you to-night, Duncan. I've got to get after the man. Besides, we've got to close that grave. But wait —I'll send for the sheriff. McCann can carry the despatch for me, can't he?"

But Hart did not stir. "How did Weir get this—this child in his hands?" he demanded chokingly.

"Get her? He stole her, confound him! I——" Rankin stopped, his keen eyes had taken in the details; he saw that the hand that Hart rested on the table was shaking. The young man was deathly pale. Rankin whistled softly. "See here, Hart, it's your duty to help me. I don't know how you feel about Weir. He's a genius, of course, and maybe he's cast a spell on you. But he stole a child fifteen years ago, and I've always thought he was mad. He disappeared utterly. You see, no one thought that the naturalist, Christian Weir, and Fred Corey were one. He'd never had any special reputation before. That's how he fooled us! Only Randall, poor old fellow, got on the trail. But the girl—if he's as mad as I think he is, the girl must be saved. How do you know but what he'll cut her throat, if pursuit's hot? I've got to get her—that's the main point. If he escapes"—Rankin shrugged his shoulders—"well, I say he's mad, anyway!"

Mad, and Helga was in his power! Hart remembered suddenly, how her figure had appeared to droop in the saddle. He thought in a flash of the girl with no other protection—and trailed by Vrooman! The blood ran cold in his veins; involuntarily his hand went into his pocket to feel for his pistol.

"You go back to the cabin, Mr. Rankin," he said quietly. "Alice is alone; she'll be frightened. Eat your supper, and I'll go to McCann's. Weir has left this cañon, but he's not far away. If any one knows where he is, it will be Jimmy McCann. By the time you and Alice have finished your supper, I'll have news."

Rankin hesitated. "I ought to go to McCann's with you," he objected; "we've no time to lose. We ought to get after them to-night."

Hart smiled grimly. "Bad traveling by moonlight for any one but a frontiersman, Mr. Rankin. We can start at dawn. They can't be far off; I think they only left here because of the fall of the rock rampart. I've been looking about; there are books and things here that I don't think he'd leave behind. Anyway, McCann can tell us much."

Rankin grunted. "If he will. These rough men are a law to themselves! But you're right about Alice. I'll go back and see that she is settled for the night. She doesn't like it here, Duncan; she's afraid of spiders, and she says your place is full of 'em," he added, chuckling.

He had started out, but he turned back.

"You'll not fail me, Hart? We've got to save that poor girl."

"I'll not fail you!" Hart's tone was grim; he was glad that the lamp was behind him now, and Rankin could not see his face.

He stayed a few moments after the lawyer left; it was strange to stand in this small, low-ceiled, log-walled room and realize that a girl had spent her life

there, with no outlook but the grim walls of the cañon and the lonely lake among the trees. His heart beat more gently now, and he looked once more at the worn books on the shelves; he saw the delicate, faltering attempts at home-making. Even Helga's little tea table still stood there, and he fancied her beautiful face in the lamplight, bent over one of those well-worn volumes. Then sharply he remembered Alice's coquettish challenge.

"If I marry you, Duncan, you'll have to give this all up!"

He turned, put out the lamp, and strode out into the night. He had a three-mile walk to McCann's before him, and he had had no supper. But he did not care for food. He found the little borro again, and took Helga's card from his neck and thrust it into his pocket.

"I'll take care of you, Tonto," he said, rubbing the burro's long ears.

Then he turned under the cedars that obscured this part of the trail to the fallen arch. A sharp sound made him stop to listen. It was not made by Tonto, yet surely some one had stumbled on a lose stone; he had heard it roll and click on another. He stepped back into the shadows and waited. Was it Weir come back—or Helga? He could hear a step now distinctly, a slow, stealthy step. Some one had come reconnoitering; not a woman, the tread was too heavy. He thrust his hand into his pocket and remembered with regret that he only had eight of the eleven shots in his pistol left. He stood in deep shadow, but, beyond him, nearer the cabin, the trail lay white. There was no sound but the whisper of the rising wind in the treetops and that stealthy tread, like an Indian on the trail!

Hart watched, almost holding his breath, and at last a man emerged in the patch of moonlight, not ten paces away. It was not Weir, returned for a reconnaisance, but Vrooman, and in his hand he carried a rifle. For an instant the impulse to shoot to kill was strong in the watcher's heart. The next he knew its folly. It would be murder; he would never fire from ambush, and in the open, Vrooman's chances were as good, if not better, than his. And, if he fell, Helga would lose a friend now in the time of her greatest need. Murder he would never commit. A fair fight was impossible—against that rifle, and too uncertain for Helga's sake. He stood still and let Vrooman pass, secure in the fact that the cañon was deserted. But the necessity of getting to McCann's, of finding out where Weir was, was sharper than ever. He had the evidence now of his own eyes that Vrooman had not given up his pursuit. He was mad for Helga, and Hart suddenly felt that he understood.

He waited until Vrooman's footsteps died away in the direction of the vacant cabin; then he took the trail to the broken arch, climbed over the crumbled stones, and emerged at the side of the creek. He had three miles of hard walking before he could reach the freighter's homestead claim, but the moon shone like day, and the trail was fairly straight, skirting the edge of the plateau and dropping down into the wooded basin, between the long buttresses of the rock that ran out from the nearest mountain. There was little climbing, and the way was deserted, except from an occasional rabbit. He was conscious, too, of a feeling of keen relief. Helga was not Weir's daughter, not the child of Randall's slayer; for the open grave had brought back the man to him. The fight could never have been equal. No more equal than it would have been for him to shoot Vrooman from ambush, yet he knew that Vrooman would have undoubtedly shot him.

But all these thoughts crossed each other only for a moment. His keenest anxiety was for Helga. He had seen the

droop of her figure in the saddle. Had she been trying to escape when her canoe was caught in the rapids? Had the slaying of Randall frightened and humiliated her? He remembered his own anger when he found Alice cowering at the edge of the cliff. He had called Helga a wild cat, and he could never forget the look in her eyes.

The trail turned sharply, and he saw it run under the pines that sheltered the end of McCann's place. Through them he could see the lights in the log hut, and he heard the sound of chopping wood. McCann, seldom at home in the daytime, was preparing kindling for the fires. Hart left the trail and struck straight through the woods to the clearing, coming upon the freighter busily at work upon some freshly cut timber. With McCann he knew that only straight questions would get straight answers, and he was sure that the big man trusted him; they had had many dealings together. He put a straight question now about Weir and Helga.

"Where are they?" he asked quietly; "I couldn't find them in the cañon, and it's important. I must see Weir soon. You can tell me, McCann, if any one can."

McCann straightened up, leaning on his ax, and Hart thought that he searched his questioner's face in the moonlight.

"I'll tell ye," he said at last. "It ain't right, maybe, for Weir never likes folks to know what he does. He's kinder nutty, to my way of thinkin', but he's quiet. He's gone off to-night. Sometime to-morrow he'll take the train. I've got a notion he's goin' up ter Alaska, but I can't say fer sure."

Hart drew a quick breath. "Are they traveling to-night? Did his daughter go with him?"

As he spoke, Mrs. McCann came to the door. She had heard him, and she blurted out the truth in spite of warning looks from her husband.

"Yes, she did, Mr. Hart, an' she didn't want to, poor lamb! She cried an' begged t' stay here with me. He just made her go. He looked—yes, I know, Jim, but I've got a mind of my own to say it—he looked crazy, an' it's my belief he is, an' that poor girl had to go with him!"

Hart's hand closed so tightly that the nails bit into his palm, but his face was calm in the moonlight.

"I want to see them both. I want to persuade him to let her remain," he said steadily. "It seems we've only got a few hours grace. Will you help me, Mrs. McCann? Tell me where they are?"

The husband and wife looked at each other a moment in doubt, then she turned to Hart, her kindly face full of determination.

"Yes, I'll tell ye," she said. "They're camping to-night down by th' river. He had a tepee there, somewhere, when he was takin' his pictures; he's mighty strange, makin' animals pull strings an' snap kodaks! Well, they're down there. I don't know just where it is, nor McCann doesn't either. But Jimmy, my boy, has taken th' horses over th' ferry to-night. He's goin' to take 'em down th' river bank to th' place where Weir's got canoes for crossin'. It's before you get t' th' rapids. It ain't so far, and th' boat gets across with th' current there; he's a regular wizard with a canoe. He an' Helga'll cross there at daybreak an' take th' horses from Jimmy. I didn't want Jimmy should go, but his father said it wouldn't hurt th' boy to hobble th' horses an' sleep under a ceder till daybreak—not a night like this!"

"Why didn't Weir go across with th' horses himself?" Hart asked quickly.

McCann chuckled. "Weir's like that! He didn't want th' men at th' ferry ter know he was goin'. Th' horses ain't his—only one of 'em, anyways. Helga left her pony here; she gave it to Jimmy."

"Yes," said his wife with a burst of feeling, "an' she cried at leavin' him."

"Down the river at daybreak!" Hart looked up at the sky, radiant still with the moonlight. He had hours to spare! "About how far, McCann?"

McCann thought a moment before he raised his ax to split another log. "About four—five miles—just above th' rapids. It's th' shortest crossin' ter th' mountain trail. I don't think he means ter take th' train for a spell, maybe not till he's out of th' State. He's a great hand for picturing critters. I reckon he's goin' ter do it on th' way."

"He's not picturin'!" cried Mrs. McCann scornfully. "He's breakin' that poor child's heart. It ain't more than five miles down th' river, Mr. Hart, from th' ferry. Be you goin'?" she added eagerly.

Hart nodded; at the moment he did not trust himself to speak.

CHAPTER XX.

DAYBREAK AND THE TRUTH.

IT was after three o'clock in the morning, and there was a white light behind the great mountain in the East. Helga stirred softly in her tepee and turned on her elbow, looking out from under the flap. She had not slept, and she had heard Weir's first movements. It was scarcely daybreak when he began to stir. But she knew he thought she was asleep; for he went about his tasks quietly, and it was not until he had kindled a fire to cook their breakfast that she heard a louder sound than the crackling of the burning wood.

She could see him from where she lay, under the shelter he had made for her, and she caught now the gaunt outlines of his huge form, his strong knotted hands busy with the task, the firelight shining upward on the white black of his face and glinting in his deepset eyes. It showed, too, his gray hair and the look —that had come only lately—of premature age. Helga studied him with a sinking heart; there was a sadness in his unguarded look that startled her. The grim determination, the locked secretiveness of the man, had concealed it; but now in the camp fire glow she saw it, like a naked thing, upon his face. The girl's eyes widened in a kind of terror. Had he been all this while not merely mad, eccentric, unlike any other man, but heartbroken over her mother's early death? She knew, he had told her once, that it had been a death blow to his happiness, but she had never realized it, never felt that it could be so. Now that her own heart ached with its trial, she began to understand dimly. Had the killing of Randall, the one thing she could not condone, have anything to do with her mother? Was she wrong to feel this horror of her father? Was it her duty, as well as her necessity, to go with him into the North without complaint? A shiver ran through her; she dreaded to go on with this hidden life, this skulking away like criminals, and they were leaving a dead man's grave behind them! But the sight of that strange white face in the firelight, with the background of rocks and scanty cedars, with dawn coming, white-footed, over the mountains, touched her soul.

Then she thought of the cabin in Secret Cañon, where she had grown up, of her poor little burro; she had asked Jimmy McCann to look out for him as well as for Rooney. She thought of the river; she loved its great voice, and the shining arch of the bridge seemed to rise before her. It brought again the thought of Hart and the girl he meant to marry. Helga rose and went to the spring to bathe her face; she would not think of them!

Now the sun was rising, and the sky was afloat with rosy clouds when she came for her breakfast. She had often helped her father prepare it, but this morning he had it ready when she came. They ate almost in silence. The little tepee was hidden in a pocket of rocks, where a tiny basin, vividly green, held

a hidden spring. On all sides of them rose the cliffs, granite and red limestone, with here and there a touch of yellow on the broken walls; behind it all the dark timber line stopped short in its ascent of the bald dark mountain, rising like a giant now against the sunrise. A cañon wren sang sweetly in the old gnarled cedar behind them. Helga noticed that, having cooked their breakfast, Weir had extinguished their fire, and only a few red coals remained. Nor did he eat; he made a pretense of it, but no more, and the girl, trying to choke down the hot coffee, looked up suddenly into his gloomy eyes. She thought she saw in them a look that she had never seen before, a look of madness. But his voice was singularly calm when he spoke.

"You do not want to go with me, Helga?" he asked her gravely, drawing a letter from his pocket and holding it in his hand. He held it all the while he talked to her, as if it were a live thing that thrilled his fingers.

Helga's conscience twinged sharply; he was her father, and she had made him feel that she did not want to be with him. It seemed unnatural, unfilial, yet she could not still the suffocating beating of her heart.

"I don't want to go North, father," she answered finally, her beautiful eyes sinking before his. "I—I dread it!"

"Suppose I gave you the choice—would you rather never see me again than go North with me now?"

She recoiled a little, lifting startled eyes to his.

"Do you mean that you'd never forgive me if I stayed behind now, if I could?" she faltered, strangely drawn to him by sympathy, yet repelled, too, by something, she knew not what, in this strange man.

"No, I don't mean that," he replied steadily. "But the time has come when you must choose. I can't hold you any longer, Helga, as I held the child I loved. I want you to know that you have been to me as my own child!"

She looked up, astonished. "But I am your own child, father!"

He held up his hand, silencing her.

"You're a woman now, Helga, and I'm going to tell you the story of my life. For it's your story, too, since you were born eighteen years ago in Rome." He stopped for an instant, tapping the letter absently. The sunlight had flooded down into the valleys and the hidden cañons; even their little basin in the rocks was overflowing with it. High up above a great eagle soared on flashing wings.

"Twenty years ago, Helga, I had a friend—or I thought I had one," he said with bitter scorn; "we'd been at school together as boys; we'd been at college together. Once I saved his life when we were adventuring in South America. Neither of us had married; he was thirty-four, I was thirty-seven. When we returned to our own country I met and loved your mother. Her name was Helga Locke, and she was an orphan. She was like you, so like you, that, as I look at you now, I see her again, her eyes, her lips, her hair. I used to love to touch her golden hair. Like her I think you have a fatal gift that drives men mad! I had never cared for any woman as my friend had. Arthur Brand—that was his name—had had many loves. There were things in his past that I would not have told my Helga. I worshipped her; she was the loveliest, the best, the sweetest woman I had ever seen, and she promised to be my wife. Helga, I was mad with happiness; I sent for Arthur and made him come to see her. They must be friends, my comrade and my wife! I saw that he admired her deeply, and she liked him at once; no woman ever failed to like him.

"I thought that, in all matters where a man must be a man, Arthur was the soul of honor, and I trusted him. Helga

had set our wedding day; we were to be married in church. She had rich relatives. A fashionable wedding was abhorrent to me, but she had set her heart on it. I asked Arthur to stand up with me. In my mad infatuation, my desire to be with Helga all the time, I even left all details to him. He got the license, the ring, the minister. He arranged for checking Helga's luggage. I was to do nothing, he said, while a friend could serve me. I was mad, mad with joy, and I trusted them both. Never, I thought, had man been so blessed in his sweetheart and his friend—his friend!" Weir laughed bitterly, and his cavernous eyes glared fiercely at the red embers of their fire, and Helga, who had listened breathlessly, recoiled from him, trembling.

"The wedding day came," he went on after a moment, and his manner was more composed, though she saw the hands that held the letter tremble. "Arthur went with me to the church; we were to wait in the sacristry until a signal from one of the ushers told us that the bride had come. An old friend of her father was to escort her to the altar and give her away. The church was full of flowers; the perfume of some of them is deadly to me still. Once I looked out and saw the crowd of her friends. I was unknown to them; it was not until later that I did any public work as a naturalist and writer. The bride was late; I waited with impatience at first, then with anxiety.

"Could she be suddenly ill? I was about to go to the house to bring her myself, when the minister told me that Arthur Brand had already gone. He said there was some delay, that he would see to it that she came in time, the kindly old man told me. That quieted me. I knew that Arthur was resourceful, quick and competent. If she was suddenly ill, or anything was wrong, he would have speedily informed me. It was, I thought, only a girl's coquetry; she wanted me to know she was in no haste to wed. The thought pleased me; I could see her lovely eyes laughing at me, her shining hair, as I pictured it, under her veil! Madman that I was, I waited. I waited nearly an hour, then, when I could hear the whispering and stirring in the audience outside, I called a cab and drove madly to the house.

"I can remember now how I felt. I tingled with mortification at the delay. It had gone too far! And I was full of fear, too. She must be ill, I thought, my beautiful girl must be terribly ill, and Arthur had been afraid to tell me. Poor fool!"

Again Weir laughed, and Helga saw the mad flash in his eyes. Then he went on in a harsh voice, without a break, to the end.

"I got there, and I found out the truth. Her cousin, a good woman, told me. She knew how I felt, and she cried while she did it! It had been all planned; she had found it out too late to warn me. Helga and Arthur Brand were married while I waited in the church—their clown! They were gone. Man and wife; they were on their wedding journey!"

"My mother," Helga cried sharply, springing to her feet and running to him, snatching at his arm with shaking hands. "My mother was Brand's wife, and I—— Father, tell me!"

His face was contracted with a spasm of pain and anger; he shook off her trembling hands.

"I am not your father," he said chokingly.

The girl recoiled, and she stood staring at him, wild-eyed, her hands clasped tight against her breast, her lips white. He looked at her for a moment with a kind of passionate agony, as if the very horror of him was driving a knife into his wound. But he rallied himself, his strong hands knotted on the letter he held.

"I didn't try to follow them," he said slowly. "If I had I would have killed Brand as easily, as simply as I have killed a rattlesnake. I did not. I went into the wilderness and began my work. I studied dumb animals and birds. I liked them better than my own kind. Out in the desert lands I found Wenonah, the squaw. I married her according to her people's rites, for she was faithful. Her son and mine, the half-breed, lost his life in the Rockies. Yes, she was my wife, and once and a while I feared for your life when I brought you. She was jealous of you, Helga."

"Your wife—that Indian woman?" Helga gasped. She remembered the silent worker and drawer of water, the splitter of wood.

"She was a squaw," he replied briefly, without emotion. "She lived and died a squaw. After four years—years that had wiped out my youth, Helga, I heard from your mother. She was in Italy, and she was dying." He stopped a moment to draw a long, deep breath of pain; the dawn had not been more gray-white than his face. "She wrote to me to beg my forgiveness, she said, for the trick she had played on me. Arthur had persuaded her to it, and Arthur had not been kind—or faithful. She said that he drank heavily. She had faded with illness since her child came. You were three years old, and she was dying. She did not know where I was, but if I was near—I traveled so much, she said,—if I was near, would I come to see her—forgive her—keep a guard over her baby? She feared for you alone in a strange land, with a dissipated father.

"Helga, when I read her letter I was in the desert lands of Arizona. It came to me months after she had written it, by an Indian runner. I went mad! Yes, I went mad!" He struck his open hand on the letter. "I traveled night and day, but when I reached Rome she was dead!" At the word his head sank on his chest, his whole great figure seemed bowed together. It was long before he spoke again, and Helga was weeping silently, her face hidden in her hands.

"She was dead, and I saw Brand at a café with a Neapolitan dancer." Weir's hands clenched, as he spoke, and his eyes shot fire. "I did not kill, Helga, for I would have been jailed in Italy, and you—my charge, as I call you still, in God's eyes, would have been defenseless. I didn't kill him; I waited; I worked silently like a mole. I found out where he kept you in a villa outside of Rome, with an Italian nurse. Your mother had died there. I found her grave, and I covered it with red roses. I knew that if he saw them they would frighten him, for a red rose was the symbol of our love, hers and mine! He had only been the serpent who crept between us. They did startle him. I saw him afterward, that very night, and I knew he had been to the grave, for he was white and shaken, not even the Neapolitan could make him laugh. He knew I had come, and he thought I would kill him. Then I learned that he loved you. Had always loved you; you were so pretty, so captivating, that he had always been proud of you. Through you I could strike at him! I was insane with joy. He thought you were hidden well, but I stole you, Helga, and took you away. He never saw you again, never knew whether you were alive or dead, and he spent a fortune looking for you!"

"And you"—Helga panted, her large eyes wide—"you're not my father?"

He shook his head, and for the first time he turned and looked at her, his own eyes darkened, his lips grim. He studied her; he saw the relief in her face, the trembling lips and hands, and his own face darkened, hardened, changed.

"My own father," Helga whispered, leaning toward him, "where is he?"

Weir touched the letter in his hand.

"He's dead, Helga, three weeks ago," he said harshly. "He died after Randall tracked me. If I'd known he was dying I would—I would never have struck down his spy in such anger that I killed him."

"You murdered him because he was trying to bring me to my father!" Helga cried, recoiling from him, shuddering. "You—why, you're a kidnaper and a murderer!"

Weir rose unsteadily to his feet. His great height then seemed tremendous. His face was white and stricken. Once he put out a hand, but it fell heavily at his side. The girl's horror of him was the horror of innocence suddenly beholding crime.

"How did you hide so long?" she cried. "How did you keep me a prisoner? Oh, I see now, I see it all! It was vengeance on my father!"

"My name is Frederick Corey," he replied harshly. "I changed it to Weir. My work made that name well known, made it famous. Yes, it was in vengeance on your father, Helga, and for your mother's sake. No matter how she had treated me I loved her! And as my own child, I love you. Helga, have you no love for me?"

The girl did not answer; again she wept, and Weir spoke slowly, deliberately.

"I have told you. Your father is dead; there is some money for you—his money. But I have meant to give you all I have. The parting of the ways has come. To him I never would have given you, but he is dead. Will you go back to his people and your mother's? They have trailed you here, and they'll find you. Or will you go with me?"

She did not answer; for years he had been a father to her. and her mother's dying cry came back to her. Her own father had failed her mother then. Helga was trembling.

"As my own daughter, I love you, child," he said sadly. "When that man, Randall, came for you, I went mad and struck him. I will guard you always; you need be hidden no longer. Will you go with me, Helga?"

She choked; her tears blinded her. Something in his emotion shook her to the soul, but she shook her head.

"I will not go!" she said in a whisper." I—I cannot!"

There was a deep silence. In it they heard far-off sounds, echoes against the rocky chasms behind them, a rustle in the treetops, far off the sharp cry of some hunting hawk. Weir did not speak again, and Helga had dropped down beside the dead ashes of their fire and was silent, too. At last she heard his footsteps going from her, but she did not raise her head. Then a dead branch cracked under his foot, and she sprang up. He was retreating, his rifle and his paddle on his shoulder.

She ran to him.

"Father!"

He turned and looked at her, agony in his face.

"You're like your mother," he said in a choked voice, madness in his eyes, "so like her that I seem to see her again!" He raised his hand with a poignant gesture, then turned and left her.

To be continued in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

ALASKA IS USING LESS EXPLOSIVES

MINING statistics published a short time ago prove that Alaska has been gradually reducing the amount of explosives used in the operation of her mines. This does not mean that mining operations have ceased, but that more modern methods are prevailing.

Peg Leg Plays Providence

By F. R. Buckley

Author of "The Gray Rider," "Peg Leg Works a Cure," etc.

THE fact is, I don't know how he entered Three Pines Valley at all. He must have sifted in by way of Longhorn City, or something; because if he had got off the train at Three Pines, in the usual way, I should surely have dispersuaded him from going any farther until he had put in at least two years in some milder section of the West—some place that's used to tourists, and whose inhabitants are clear in their minds as to the difference between a panama hat and a twenty-five yard revolver target.

When I was younger and more kittenish than I am now, in my seventy-third year, tenderfoots or tenderfeet, as the case may be, used to give me considerable pleasure, in an innocent way. I used to like snatching them out of death by the fuzz on the tops of their skulls; and then again, it tickled my vanity to have 'em sit by the bed of pain to which they always brought me, and pretend to listen to my valuable advice about Life.

However, the amusement palled at last; so much so, that when I heard that this Mr. George Wells was in the country, wearing a straw hat, I was dismayed; and when the Gold Creek *Bugle* announced that him and Mary Stone, of the Flying S, had become engaged by mutual consent, it was all that Jack Henson could do to prevent me throwing myself under Number 17.

"I appreciate your feelings," says Jake, breathlessly, jamming me down into a chair and hitching up his gun belt again, "but this is not the exact moment at which I should wish to succeed to the office of sheriff. Permit me to remark, Mister Garfield, that the peace officer who gets turned into raspberry jelly by a train just at the moment when an Easterner gets engaged to the idol of all the sharpshooters hereabouts, is little better than a poltroon or cowyard."

"The sheriff who stays alive, and protects the Easterner under the circumstances aforesaid," I remarked, "is liable to be little better than a corpse."

Jake yawned.

"Nor is his deputy," I added, "likely long to retain his present likeness to the Apollo Baltimore. However, shoot yourself. I mean, suit yourself."

Jake is a good trailer, and an excellent hand with a frying pan; but his mind works slow, and apparently his part in the prospective unpleasantness had not fully occurred to him heretofore.

"Ha," says he, sitting down himself, 'that's true, Bill. It'll take more'n you yourself to handle that bunch that's bin

hangin' after Mary, if they do start any unpleasantness. Er—I wonder——"

"Whether maybe we couldn't stun this Wells guy one evening, and ship him away from here?" I asked, watching Jake give a violent start of surprise at my mind reading. "No—we couldn't. Say, ain't you old enough to understand the nature of an oath of office?"

"I'm only thirty," says Jake, "an' evidently you was thinkin' of the same thing yourself."

Well, there was no use in following that subject any further, so I changed it; suggesting that maybe this Wells wasn't as big a blot on the earth's crust as reports made him seem to be.

"He's bigger," says Jake, pessimistically, "or rather, smaller. He's a little runt no more'n five foot ten, an' you know all the boys he's liable to run up against are over six foot except 'Slash-Him' Angus. He's kind of thickset, but from what I could judge, seein' him out ridin' with Mary Stone as I rode over, it's all white meat. He ain't got a bad jaw on him—at least, it wouldn't look bad if he'd only drape a cigareet over it. But he don't smoke, Bill; nor chew. And his clothes—O my! He looks like fifteen pages from the Montgomery & Sears Catalogue, where the customer pays the expressage. The only comfort I can see is that there's one plot left in the cemetery—you know—under the scrub oak tree. Though I hate diggin' through roots."

I wanted to come out with some cheery words about there going to be no necessity for using spades if we made proper use of our guns and gray matter; but Jake seemed in no mood for inspiration. So I merely said we could blast if necessary, and asked him if he had seen any of the disappointed suitors, since the melancholy event had been announced.

"Yeah," says Jake, "that's what I come over to tell you. 'Gotch-Ear' Jordan I seen this afternoon, practicin' shootin' the tails off runnin' jack rabbits from the hip. He got six straight while I was watchin' him, an' then his gun was empty, not to mention me feelin' kind of depressed; so I came away. I went into 'Timsy' Geogehan's place in Gold Creek, to get a drink of sarsaparilla; but 'Punkletump' Rogers was there buyin' cartridges, while Slash-Him Angus was busy tryin' out huntin' knives by throwin' 'em at a door; so I thought I'd get my drink down in the Temple of Chance basement. But I didn't get anythin'. 'Handsome' Harry Fortnum was there, showin' a couple more boys a pair of brass knucks, an' ——"

"He's broke his pledge, has he?" I asked.

"Why shouldn't he, since the girl's give him the mitt?" asks Jake. "I hope it's the only thing he does break, though I doubt it."

"Doubt" was a mild word, in the circumstances.

"Well," says I, ever striving to be merry and bright, "after all, perhaps everything's for the best, Jake. Think if that nice little girl had gone and married Handsome Harry, an' he was well in the lead, until this Wells pazooza turned up. He'd have broken the pledge when he was married, all right, and broke up the Flying S, too, pretty pronto."

"Yeah," says Jake, "but neither the pledge nor the Flying S belongs to me, whereas my face does. An' Harry looked as if he wouldn't mind taking a whale at it this afternoon, before there was any real need to. That's why I didn't get my drink, an' why I need one so bad right now."

I was feeling kind of rocky myself, to tell the truth; and there's no knowing what might have happened, had not my eye kind of wandered out of the door, and focused on the spectacle of a guy in a straw hat riding a pony as if he was under the impression it was a rowboat.

I don't mean he was trying to steer

the horse by its tail; I allude to the motion of his arms, which, as he balanced himself, looked as if he was rowing against a high wind. He had one foot out of the stirrup when I saw him; and though the pony was one that the Circle S had turned loose for spavin, and which Mary Stone had taken in because she liked antiques, it was only a matter of moments until the rider should lose the other stirrup and get spilled.

Judging by the condition of his formerly stylish clobber, he had fallen several times already, on his five mile ride from the Flying S, for of course, I recognized the newcomer at once. Before picking himself up at the foot of my porch steps, he betrayed an ignorance of horses and the West generally. by alluding to poor old Sally Jane as a mustang and a buck-jumper, and there was no necessity for him to waste what little breath he had left, telling me his name was George Wells.

"Are you feeling pretty well to-day?" I asked.

He nodded, gasping.

"I'm glad of that. Because the present indications are that you won't be feeling so to-morrow. Take a good look at the scenery while it's still visible. You know what the poet says about time being a-flyin', and this same flower which blooms to-day, to-morrow may be dying. There is, however, a train in an hour's time."

"I don't know any poetry," says Wells. "And I won't take a train."

Well, I hadn't seriously expected he would do the sensible thing and beat it; but I was disappointed about his not recognizing the classics. In books, all these Easterners quote Latin and Greek like billy-o.

"In fact, I came over," says Wells, "to tell you—you are Mr. Garfield, the sheriff, aren't you?—came over to tell you that Miss Stone and I—excuse my breathlessness—think that since I'm going to stay in the district permanently, it would be better if I paddled my own canoe."

I thought for a minute he meant what he'd been doing on the horse.

"In other words," says he, after a pause, "if you and this gentleman, who I understand is your deputy, left me to settle any trouble that may arise with —well, I'm sure you understand what I mean. We have heard that certain former acquaintances of Miss Stone's—one man in particular—are making threats against me personally, and Miss Stone thought that you might be inclined to intervene, since I'm a stranger here. But since the matter is purely personal, we think I'd better attend to it personally, as is the custom of the district, I understand, since I am going to stay here permanently."

"If a permanent stay is your idea," says Jake, "attending to Handsome Harry Fortnum will fix it for you, all right."

"You mean——?" says Wells, kind of alarmed; and then looked at me and Jake brightly, and laughed.

"Ah," says he, "you're trying to frighten me. Mary told me you might; but of course, I quite understand."

We gawped at him. Of course, I saw right away what the situation was. Neither him nor Mary Stone, who had been educated in the East, and had only been in our midst two years, since her pa died, took the hasty ways of cowpunchers seriously. Wells had never had anything to do with them at all, and Mary had only seen 'em when they were eating, or bringing a pony around to the front door, or such; and both she and her fiancé were figuring that violence died out of the West along with the bison.

Probably this jasper's idea was to have a nice friendly talk with Handsome Harry Fortnum, and Slash-Him Angus, and the rest, shake hands, and be better friends ever afterward.

"It's no use arguing with him, Jake," I said, as Mr. Henson opened his capacious mouth to speak.

"Not a bit," says Mr. Wells, rising. "Now, I'll tell you what my program is, Mr. Garfield, just so that you shan't be worried. I'm going to see Mr. Fortnum —you know Mr. Fortnum?"

"Yea, we know him all right," says Jake. "Was it two ribs he broke on Willie Mountford, Bill, or——"

"I am going to see Mr. Fortnum," says Wells, waving this attempt to scare him aside with one hand, "and I am going to explain that—well, in short, that the best man—what Miss Stone considered the best man—won. It was not my fault; I played fair, of course. If that explanation does not content him, and I don't see why it shouldn't, if he has any sense at all, I shall settle the matter finally by asking him, and the other men involved, to appoint a champion to represent them, and this champion I'll take on, with the gloves or without, to a finish."

"Huh?" gasps Jake Henson.

"Yes. Now—it took me a long time to get over here on that wild horse, and I must be starting back. I've got to go to the Flying S before I return to the Bar T, where I'm staying, you know. So glad to have met you, Mr. Garfield. Good afternoon, Mr. Henson. Good afternoon!"

Jake followed him out, protesting like a calf that has lost its mother; but without the slightest effect. The poor goof —and he was a nice, clean-cut boy, even if he did talk like Webster's Unabridged —had discussed this plan with Mary Stone, who'd never seen even a dog fight—until it was regularly fixed in his mind as the one thing to do under the circumstances.

Short of actual imprisonment, nothing was going to prevent him from proposing a fist fight to Handsome Harry Fortnum, who was undisputed heavyweight champion of Three Pines County, who had learned chin-kicking in the Michigan lumber camps, biting in Mexico, and the fine art of gouging from his dear old Dad, the celebrated—but of course you've heard of "Mad" Dick.

I was feeling pretty blue about the prospects for Mr. Wells' future, when he left the store; and I suppose it must have struck Jake as funny, when he returned two minutes later, to find me laughing and grinning over the top of a newspaper. At the same time, he should have known better, as my deputy, than to ask his superior officer what the infernal regions was the matter. Discipline has got to be maintained.

"Nothing's the matter," I therefore told him coldly.

"Well, I think there is," says Jake in a low growl, "there's a nice boy goin' to dash himself to pieces as surely as if he jumped off Bald Knob, an' there's a nice, sweet girl goin' to cry her eyes out over what's left of him after the catastrophe, an' you say nothing's the matter. Say, what are you going to do about this fist fight, anyway?"

"I was thinking," I remarked, "of insisting that it take place right out in front of the store, here, where I can referee."

Jake stared at me with his mouth open.

"Right is mighty," I told him, "and will prevail. I have no doubt in the world but that Mr. Wells will make hay with his heavier opponent."

"You're gonna allow it?"

"Who," I asked him, "am I to interfere? That boy's in the right; and the right is mighty, and——"

It was pathetic to see perplexity struggling with rage on Jake's face as he turned and went out to his horse; but a little puzzlement is liable to sharpen his wits, and besides, he shouldn't have been so fresh when he came in.

From the gentle reader, however, I can conceal nothing; so I will here quote the paragraph I'd seen on the sporting

page of the *Chicago News,* while Jake was outside.

"George B. Wells, the coming heavyweight, having finished off all available opponents and dispatched his manager East to endeavor to arrange for a match with Champion Dempsey, has left the city for a holiday to be spent in Southern Texas."

II.

Now, there are two things I don't do as a rule. One is, tell stories about meek little Easterners that turn out to be bearcats; and the other is, bet. If I seem to be doing the first right now, don't be too hasty in judging me; and if, as I am going to admit, I did the second rather extensively during the next few days, consider the provocation.

Jake, my own deputy, went around all the ranches, telling how I'd suddenly gone insane; and every puncher I'd ever pulled out of mischief by the scruff of the pants telephoned in, anxious to take advantage of my condition and grab some of my money off me.

They would call up to ask how I was feeling, and if my memory was working good; and when I said it was, they all wanted me to remember wagers ranging from five to one in nickels, to forty to one in dollars, that Handsome Harry Fortnum would take George Wells and the right that was on his side, and knock both the man and the principle for a covey of shooting stars. I tried to explain, at first; but they called that hedging, and used language which is not permitted over the telephone in this State; so finally I got an exercise book out of stock, and dotted the wagers down.

By the evening on which Mr. Wells had his interview with Mr. Fortnum at the Flying S, there were fifty-seven bets placed, totaling about a hundred dollars on my side, and about ten per cent of two thousand on theirs; in saying which, I mean that two thousand dollars was what they had bet, and that ten per cent was about all I had any chance to collect, if I won.

"However, you won't win, Bill," says "Pie-Face" Lammermoor, who had ridden over to tell me the result of the Flying S conference, "so don't worry about collections. Local opinion may have been wrong about the boy's courage, for I admit we never thought he'd issue the challenge after taking a good look at Fortnum close to. It's mighty easy to misjudge character. Look how many people have taken you, Bill, for a poor old spinach-covered, moth-eaten, timber-toed maverick from the Better Land——"

"I hardly know," says I gently, "whether to thank you for the compliment, or brain you with the poker; and I hate perplexity. Let's change the subject. When's the fight to take place?"

"To-morrow afternoon," says Pie-Face. "Right in front of the store, the way you said. And say, Bill. The boys told me—I mean to say—— Well, if you know what I mean——"

"Of course I do," I told him, "Nothing could be clearer, except perhaps mud."

"What I came over to say was," says Pie-Face, "that me and the rest of the boys hadn't met this Wells guy when we were so eager to bet against him, and now we have, and we kind of like him, whereas we don't like Fortnum any more'n we do any other rattle snake. Seems kind of a pity for Wells to be so beat up he'll be laughed out of the country; an' we thought, that is, it was suggested, that if you wanted to call all bets off, an' prevent this scrap by running Fortnum over the border an' tellin' him not to come back, we'd be agreeable. We'd help, too."

I permitted myself to sneer.

"You've seen Wells doing a little sparring practice, have you?" I asked.

"Yes, we have," says Pie-Face. "In fact, it was Two-Toes Trotter he was

sparrin' with, after this here conference. Two Toes said you was likely to have something up your sleeve, Bill, and he wanted to try the jasper out. Say, it was pathetic. This Wells stood up, back of the Flying-S Barn, an' Two-Toes give him a push, an' he fell over, an' he got up, an' Two-Toes give him a harder push, an' he fell down again, an' got up, still smilin', an' then Two-Toes give him a real hard push, an' he fell down an' rolled over, an' got up smilin' more than ever, so Two-Toes shook hands with him. It's a wicked shame, Bill."

My already high opinion of George Wells went up several degrees. He was not only a prize fighter in disguise, but he was keeping the false hair on up to the very last moment, and thus safeguarding a poor old man's investments.

"The right is mighty," says I to Pie-Face, "and will prevail. As for your proposal about kidnaping and so on—have you ever heard of the Revised Statutes, and the Penal Code?"

"Have you ever heard," asked Pie-Face, getting red, "of those hairy faced gentlemen back in history, that used to make money throwin' Christians to the lions?"

"Can you see the door behind you?" I asked pointedly, picking up an empty ginger ale bottle.

So he went; which was just as well, in view of the fact that there was a shooting feud between him and Mr. Job Angus, commonly known as Slash-Him, and that Mr. Angus rode up to the store about three minutes later. Apparently, this bosom friend of Handsome Harry Fortnum's had also been a witness of the sparring bout, which would have surprised me had I not known that Slash-Him's two specialities were knifing people from behind, and seeing things that he was not supposed to see.

"Hello, Bill," says he, in a Scotch accent I have tried in vain to fit into this typewriter. He was not really a Scotsman; nobody knew exactly what he was. Scotland was unlucky enough to be around when he picked out his nationality, that's all.

"Did you ever play checkers?" I asked him.

"Huh?"

"Of course you have played that noble game. Now, you remember how to take a piece at checkers? You jump your man from the square in front of it to the square behind it; and I'd be obliged if you'd apply the same principle to my name. See? Start at the 'Mister,' jump over the 'Bill', and come to the 'Garfield', making a total of Mister Garfield. Do you catch me? To put it in blunt language, Angus, I don't let my Christian name be used by any skunks, snakes, or coyotes at all, and I can't make an exception in your favor. What's on your mind except murder?"

I don't usually speak rough to my clientele, but Angus don't play fair with me. He not only commits crimes, but he leaves no evidence.

"I wanta know," says he, "what about this Wells guy?"

"So do we all."

"Yeah," says Angus, "but I want to know particularly. I seen him boxing with Two-Toes Trotter, and if it's straight goods, I want to double the money I've got bet against him. But I don't believe it is straight goods; in fact, I'm about ready to copper all the bets I've laid already. It ain't natural a guy should be as rotten a scrapper as that fellow lays out to be. He don't know how to put his hands up, even. I think he's faking. What do you think?"

"It's five-five now," I remarked, "and I never think outside of business hours. Good afternoon."

"It'll be worth fifty wheels to you, if you'll give me the dope," says Angus. "You've seen him fight when he wasn't faking. Now then, how good is he?"

"I never saw him fight in my life."

"You mean," demands Angus, "that you haven't got any stable information about this jasper?"

"I never saw him in my life," says I carefully, "until yesterday."

"Then what in Pete's name are you bettin' on him for?"

"I'm not. I'm just accepting bets against him. Right is mighty, Mister Angus, and will prevail. What is muscle, compared with morals? What are uppercuts, when stacked against uprighteousness? How can a punch prevail against purity?"

Angus looked at me for a long time, and then walked to the door.

"You don't," he asked from around the lintel, "ever have spells of imaginin' you're a sea-serpent, do you? Have you ever been convinced that you're the Prophet Ezekiel, or anythin'? Shall I send Doc Brewer to you, Mister Garfield?"

And he left—hastily. Jake Henson has since remarked that if I'd only controlled my feelings, and let Angus lay additional bets with me, instead of with Bald Jack or Prairie Dog, we should probably, when he paid up, have got a clue to those bank notes that disappeared from the Acacia First National last year; but that's beside the point. Putting aside all the devices Jake has since adopted to annoy me, and save face, and so on, we will now come to the description of what I remember of the fight.

It's not much.

Of course, I'm perfectly clear about the preliminaries. It was six o'clock exactly when Handsome Harry Fortnum rode up, dressed in a pair of trousers, a jacket, and an American flag which I took the liberty of removing from his person, and accompanied by Angus and several other lowbrows.

It was five minutes past six when George Wells arrived, still endeavoring to row this fifteen-year old broncho like a skiff, and accompanied by about twenty punchers who had bet against him, but who were sorry he was going to get killed. Pie-Face Lammermoor came over and told me in a low, sad voice, that Mary Stone had been all fixed to come along, and that it had taken the five minutes they were late, to dissuade her.

"She said the lady involved was always present at the old tournaments, Bill," says Pie-Face, "you know, when the old-timers filed each other on lances an' what not. We told her this was liable to be a sight worse looking than any lance fight, an' Bill, you should have seen her face when we rode away. She's scared stiff, an' she loves this here Wells boy. What's she goin' to say when he comes home in a lot shipment?"

I was watching Mr. Wells getting ready for the battle, and, quite apart from what Pie-Face had been saying, a cold sensation was setting about my lungs. I don't believe in making mysteries where none are necessary, so I'll say right now that the boy was not acting like my idea of a prize fighter at all. He was rolling up his shirt sleeves, and talking to Two-Toes Trotter, and from all I could gather, he was asking Two-Toes whether it was the left hand you kept to guard with, or the right.

"She didn't know," mumbled Pie-Face, "how rough us boys can be when roused. She thought the fight was to be with gloves, for another thing. Why, Bill, she asked me if we couldn't get Fortnum to agree there should be no hittin' in the face. There's still time to run that guy over the border—an' his pals with him."

"The right is mighty," says I, from force of habit, watching Wells practicing a straight left that wouldn't have dented butter, "and will prevail."

"Is that all you got to say?" demanded Pie-Face angrily.

"How much longer am I goin' to be kept waitin'?" howls Handsome Harry Fortnum.

I stumped out onto the veranda, watch in hand. It may seem incredible, but this was the moment at which it first occurred to me that there might be two people named George Wells in the United States, and that one of them might be a prize fighter without the other's knowing anything about it.

"Is your name," I asked, looking at the boy, who was smiling all around, "George B. Wells, of Chicago?"

"George Lionel," says he, beaming. "And San Francisco's where I come from."

"It's where you're going back to, what's more," growls Handsome Harry, while my personal heart absolutely sank two feet.

"Suppose we don't decide that until after the fight?" says Wells, smiling.

"Then let's get on with the fight," roars Fortnum. "I've got a date ten miles away from here, in twenty minutes. I got to hurry."

"One moment," says I, in a strangled voice. I don't expect the gentle reader to sympathize with me any, because sympathy is impossible, unless one's been in exactly the same predicament, which I hope nobody has since the beginning of the world. Of course I ought to say that the prospective loss of the money wasn't worrying me, and that all I am sorry about was the approaching massacre of the innocent.

"This fight," I told the contestants weakly, "will be strict Marquess of Queensberry rules, and the first man to foul gets a bullet in the ankle, with the referee's love."

"Why——" began Handsome Harry, who had arranged at the Flying-S conference, that it should be a rough-and-tumble, which probably sounded playful to Wells, but which included kicking.

"Well?" I asked, pulling a gun.

His thoughts were perfectly obvious as he reflected that his experience would enable him to foul without a poor blind old man like me seeing him.

"All right," he grumbled.

"What are Marquess of Queensberry rules?" asks Wells.

There was a general groan.

"Do unto others as you'd have 'em do to you," I told him, pityingly. "Now, are you ready?"

"Yes!" howls Fortnum. I saw that Wells was advancing with his hand outstretched, to shake.

"Well, I'm not," I informed Handsome Harry. "I've got something to say yet. The first thing is, that if you knock that boy's block off while he's holding out his hand, the way I see you're thinking of doing, I'll ballast your legs for you. The second thing is about you, Wells. Do you realize that if you lose this scrap, there won't be much place for you around here? I mean, nobody'll——"

"I understand so," says Wells, with a kind of shadow on his face.

"Do you want to go on, on those conditions?"

He grinned, though not really amused.

"Why, yes," he said.

I went slowly down the porch steps and took the referee's position.

"Well, may the right be mighty, and prevail," says I. "Time!"

It was no use—I had to turn my back on it—of which momentary weakness Handsome Harry took advantage to the extent of about eight fouls, as attested by the groans of the bystanders. You would have thought that when he was just plain battering Wells into jelly with straight punches, he could have afforded to do without the assistance of his elbow, his knee, and his feet; but there are men who prefer dirty fighting, and he was one of them. By the end of the first round, he had used all these tricks, though without giving me any evidence on which to plug him in the tendon Achilles; so, when I'd called "Time!" again, I shut up my watch and resigned.

"Does that mean that your little friend's had enough?" says Fortnum, grinning over at where Wells was being roughly stuck together by Two-Toes and Pie-Face Lammermoor.

"Not on your life!" calls the boy, indistinctly on account of his mouth being larger than he was used to.

"It's merely intended to mean that I won't referee any longer," I told Fortnum. "It means that you're too clever a thug for me, and that I won't take the responsibility for seeing you don't act like a Pawnee Indian. It simply means that I know you're aiming to cripple this boy by foul means, but that I can't see 'em clearly enough to justify my shooting you, and that I therefore won't hold the watch at all. Do you see, you mangy wolf, you?"

There was a low growl from the punchers that indicated they saw, anyway; and that they were quite willing to act on what they saw. But Wells intervened, grinning, as well as he could with his remodeled face.

"No, gentlemen," says he, "I can't allow that. I took this fight on my own free will, and I'm going through with it. If I kind of underestimated it, that's my fault. Mr. Garfield, you said the right was mighty and would prevail. Don't you trust the principle any more?"

"You're gonna let a boy like that be assassinated?" moans Pie-Face Lammermoor in my ear.

"Are you ready?" comes the voice of Handsome Harry, full of viciousness.

"Yes," says George Lionel Wells, of San Francisco.

Well, of course it was obvious he couldn't have lasted out even another three-minute round; much less an unlimited bout as this threatened to be. Obvious to us, that is; for George Lionel didn't seem to see it. Handsome Harry rushed him like a charging elephant, and hit him half a dozen punches that must have jarred the boy pretty near into unconsciousness; yet he didn't become unconscious, and didn't seem to have any idea that the battle was now hopeless. Or if he had the idea, he didn't act on it.

In fact, when Handsome Harry drew back to give his opponent plenty of room to fall down in, George L. Wells, surprised us all by gathering his faculties, and actually attempting to rush Handsome Harry in his turn. That is to say, he stumbled forward with his knees wobbling, and was met by a right to the jaw, and a left hook to the cheek, followed by a straight left that floored him.

"Had enough?" asked Handsome Harry; and received no verbal reply, for the reason that Wells couldn't speak. However, having risen to his knees, he shook his head, and proceeded to show willingness for more by rising.

"Well, darn my——" roared Fortnum, rushing forward to finish him.

Now, I must explain how this happened—I was standing right there, in my capacity of spectator, and saw it all clearly, which nobody else did, having turned their eyes away. Handsome Harry wasn't aiming to wait until Wells was on his feet, nor he wasn't going to break any more knuckles on the boy. What he tried to do was to catch his adversary staggering from his knees to a standing position, and knock him silly by a drive of the elbow against his temple, as provided against in the rules.

This, however, is a more or less difficult trick, and Handsome Harry was careless about it; so that he missed. As he rushed past, off his balance, Wells made a final effort, got erect, and though it was impossible he should see with his eyes bunged up the way they were, launched a last feeble punch at the noise which represented Fortnum.

The punch landed; to be exact, it hit Harry behind the left ear, just hard enough, considering that he was off his balance already, to make him tangle his legs and fall over.

This was simple enough. Both the combatants fell to the ground together, in fact, Wells having fainted. The peculiar feature of the thing was that Handsome Harry Fortnum failed entirely to laugh and get up. In fact, he lay on the ground perfectly still; and, as examination proved, perfectly unconscious; dead to the world.

"He's hit his head on a rock!" shouts Slash-Him Angus, rushing over to where Fortnum lay at my feet. "Look! A great big flat rock."

However, rocks and all other natural phenomena being included in such bouts as this one had become, I said nothing, but counted Mr. Fortnum out.

"It ain't fair," shrieks Angus.

"No?" asks Pie-Face Lammermoor, toying with a gun. "Did Wells punch him? Did he fall? Did he become unconscious? Well, then?"

"What do you say about it, you, referee?" howls Slash-Him.

Of course, I wasn't referee any longer; but my opinion is always to be had for the asking.

"The right is mighty, and will prevail," I remarked.

"I suppose," snarls Slash-Him, "that it was the Right that put that rock just exactly where Fortnum'd happen to bang his head on it when he fell."

It would have been a great gratification to me to let it go at that, and have myself proved correct about this right-is-might proposition; it was the logical thing to do, and would have brought me in a lot of money. But on the other hand, give me the man who prefers his principles to his vanity.

I therefore drew out my betting book and, before the eyes of Pie-Face Lammermoor and the rest, as they looked up from the job of reviving Mr. Wells, tore the record of the wagers into pieces. With my peg leg I then indicated the track of the flat rock, where it had slid forward about two feet over the sand, to its present position under Mr. Fortnum's head—and serve him right, too, the foul-fighting lummox.

"No," I confessed, beaming on Angus, and putting my hands on my gun butts. "You see, Right is a lady, and not suited to rough work. So when it came to shifting boulders around—why, I did that."

THE GLUTTONOUS BALD EAGLE

DURING the spawning season the Pacific coast salmon frequently die and are washed up on the shores, where they become food for many kinds of flesh-eating birds. The bald eagle is the most gluttonous of these birds. Some salmon are very large, weighing often close to thirty pounds, often more. When a bald eagle finds this amount of food lying on the beach, its voracious instincts seem to impel it to consume the entire fish at one meal.

In the late fall it is often possible to see a large bald eagle hopping along on the beach or the bank of a river, unable to fly because of its over-gorged crop. The immense quantity of fish in the craw prevents the use of the bird's wings, and the strongest flyer of all birds is forced to cower down among the mud and rocks until the heavy meal can be assimilated. According to naturalists eagles usually eat just what they require to sustain life, but there is something about the salmon of the north Pacific that induces the eagle to stuff itself.

Other species of eagles carry away to the crags all prey and eat it there in solitude and safety; but the bald eagle finds the salmon too tempting a morsel of diet to defer his meal, and he lunches just where he finds this very appetizing food.

The Cleansing Bullet

By Edward Leonard

CHAPTER I.

DESERT TRACKS.

ITH furtive glances from under his heavy, sandy eyebrows, Nick Ballard, the storekeeper at Horsehead, studied the customer, who, leaning in slouching fashion against the counter, was intent on rolling a cigarette. The storekeeper was growing old. His thin hair was gray, his narrow shoulders stooped, his sharp, sun-browned face was deeply wrinkled. He had enough rough experience of life to make him distrustful of most persons, and what he knew about this slender, black-haired, blue-eyed young man was sufficient to beget caution and suspicion in anybody.

News travels very slowly over the desert, but the story of the lurid career of Joe Duval, otherwise known as "Yuma Joe," had at last found its way to this remote, abandoned mining camp, where a white man came not once in a month. Ballard had not been able to shake off entirely the effect this information had produced on him, yet he was inclined to give the young man the benefit of the doubt, and to conclude that he had buried his past and was no longer to be feared.

Duval had been coming into Horsehead at long intervals for two years, and during all that time nothing had occurred to his discredit. Indeed, the lonely life he had been leading as a prospector in the desolate bad lands along the border seemed to have changed his character. His eyes had lost their ugly, menacing expression, his manner had softened. Perhaps he himself had almost forgotten that he had once been a particularly dangerous holdup man, the dread of lone travelers north of the Gila.

On the counter lay several pieces of gold-studded quartz. The storekeeper reached out and covered them with a scrawny hand. For a moment he seemed to be trying to estimate their value, though he had already bought and paid for them. During his twelve years at Horsehead his little income from the store had been more than equaled by his profits of buying gold from Papago dry washers and sometimes from white prospectors. These nuggets had been brought in by Duval.

"Better than nothing, Joe," he commented, "yet it ain't so much, considering the time spent. You been gone 'bout two months this trip. Gettin' kind of tired of it?"

Duval paused to light his cigarette.

His face was turned away, and the clean-cut profile was handsome from that angle. But when he turned to Ballard the storekeeper winced, for now in the almost boyish face could be read the story of the past. Two years had not wiped it out. It was there as plain as ever, the mark of the thief, and Ballard told himself it would always be there, ineradicable, blazoning the story of what the man had been and, perhaps, still was.

"I'm goin' to stick to it, Nick," Duval answered. "You noticed anything special 'bout one o' them nuggets? One of 'em's lava. That's where I've just come from, over in the lava beds. Most folks don't take no stock in stories of gold in lava, but there's the proof of it, and I'm goin' back there pronto."

Ballard shook his head doubtfully. "I get hold of a lava nugget two or three times in a dog's age," he returned, "but it's just a freak o' nature. You wouldn't find one a year. You better stick to the hills. Them lava beds are dangerous. Sometimes men never come back from 'em. You'll get too fur away from water some time, and—well, you know what that means. There's ten prospectors passed through here in my time whose bones are lyin' out there on the lava or the sand somewheres. And every one of 'em thought he knew this country, just like you think you know it."

Duval's lips twitched in a hard, mirthless smile. "I dunno as it'd make much difference if I happened to get too fur from water some time," he mused bitterly, his voice scarcely more than a whisper. "There ain't nobody who'd spill any tears on my account. I reckon I wouldn't be no worse off if I was lyin' out there bein' picked dry by the coyotes." For a moment he studied his cigarette in silence, while he slowly flicked off the ashes with the tip of a finger. "But I know now that that ain't what's goin' to happen, Nick," he resumed. "Somethin' else is waitin' for me. I'm going' to win out. I been hearin' voices out there, and that's what they've been sayin' to me."

"Voices?" The storekeeper raised his eyebrows and shot a quick, sharp glance at his companion. "Huh! I've heard folks talk about them desert voices. If you've begun to hear 'em it means you've been too long out there alone. It ain't good for any man, that kind of a life, year in and year out without ever a break. It makes him see things and hear things that ain't so. You better give it up for a spell and hit the trail for somewheres where it ain't so lonely."

Suddenly the young man's face hardened. The cigarette slipped unnoticed from trembling fingers. For some time he did not speak. With wide, vacant eyes he was staring through the open doorway at the long, glaring vista of sun-baked valley. "Me?" he muttered at last. "Go back where there's folks?" His voice broke into a harsh laugh.

Pondering the problem the storekeeper drummed softly on the counter with gnarled fingers. "No," he told himself, "this hombre can't go back where there's folks. And I reckon I can figger out the reason. Mebbe he'd like to go back. I can read in his eyes that he's yearnin' to, and I've doped out the answer. He can't go back. Even if the law ain't reachin' for him, he can't go back now nor ever."

With a shrug of his shoulders Duval moved toward the door. "Time I was hittin' the trail again," he announced. "Everythin's all set for travelin'."

Ballard followed him to the door. "You going to head for them lava beds?" he asked.

"Sure," was the reply. "Straight across the medanos."

"The medanos!" The storekeeper frowned, as he echoed the words. He had heard of men before who had headed straight across the medanos, the vast sand dunes, that stretch their great

white deadly arms up across the border from the waterless wastes of Sonora. Some of those men had returned, and some would never return. "Well, you better take it from me that mebbe you'll go out into that kind of country once too often."

"Don't you worry 'bout me, Nick. Look at them two animals. They can go without a drop of water for eighty hours, either of 'em, and they've done it many a time. And they and me know all about the sand country." He pointed to a mule and a drowsing burro that stood in front of the store. The burro's packsaddle was loaded heavily with canteens and food supplies. "I'd never risk the medanos with a horse. But them two—why they'll drink water that a thirsty horse wouldn't look at, and they can eat anythin'. A horse is too derned partic'ler 'bout his food and drink. The greasers say a horse never comes back from the medanos, and I reckon they're 'bout right."

As Duval swung himself into the mule's saddle and started off on his lonely wanderings, the little burro came out of his dreams with a start, pricked his long ears forward, and through force of long habit, began to plod patiently along at the other animal's heels.

For a long time Ballard stood in the doorway looking after them. He watched them until they had become mere specks in the glare of the sun, until they had faded against the horizon. Now he turned back into the store, dropped into a chair ,and pulled out his pipe and tobacco. He was beginning to feel lonely, as he always did after a white man had left him. "Sometimes I think all the deviltry's gone out of the boy for good and all," he mused. "And then again I ain't so sure. If the chance ever came his way off out there of cleanin' out some prospector, I dunno as I'd care to bet on his not doing it. I understand that robbin' prospectors up above the Gila was an old habit of his." The storekeeper sighed. "Well, he'll never go back to that country again. It ain't the law he's afraid of. I know what it is that keeps him away from white folks." Thoughtfully he lit his pipe. "And I dunno," he added between puffs, "but if I was him I'd go out and shoot myself."

In fact there had been a time when suicide had appealed to Duval himself, as the only way out of his troubles. More than once the muzzle of his gun had been pressed against his heart, his finger ready at the trigger. But in each of these crises his thoughts had wandered back to a red-haired man whom he had met only once in his life, whose name he did not know; and thinking of that stranger had saved him. Better to live, he had decided, that he might meet the red-haired man again. There would be murder then. There would be time to think of suicide after he had had his revenge.

Then, after long months alone on the desert, the burly figure of the red-haired man had receded farther and farther into the dim recesses of memory. The hot flame of fury had sunk to a feeble flicker. The burning longing for revenge was no more so complete an obsession. Solitude had had a taming effect upon him, and the fires of hate were almost dead. And yet he had not wholly forgotten the red-haired man. Sometime the stranger, always on the hunt for gold, would come trailing down to this country, and somewhere on sand dune, or lava bed, or greasewood plain, Joe Duval's gun would be ready for him.

But now, as Horsehead faded behind him, and as he rode slowly on and on into the glaring malpais, the thoughts of Yuma Joe were not disturbed by the red-haired man, or by any recollections of the shady past. He was thinking of the voices that again and again had come to his ears out of the silence of the

desert, supernatural voices that had seemed to be calling to him, that had seemed to be urging him on to success, to whatever goal he desired. That goal now was gold, and the voices had come whispering over the sands like a soft wind, saying: "You will find it! You will find it!" Voices! It was the old, old story of border prospectors, their imagination feverish from loneliness. Such men sometimes see and hear strange uncanny things on the desert. A mirage hangs above the horizon, showing them all the longings of their dreams. A gust of wind breaks into human speech. A glint of moonlight on the sand turns into a moving specter.

To right and left of him fantastic, saw-tooth mountains, that seemed to belong to another world, were silhouetted sharply against the sky. He was traveling over hard sand and hard-baked clay thinly strewn with greasewood bushes of pale, cloudy green. Here and there a deeper green caught his eye, where a stiff saguaro raised its tall column. The palo fierro was here, too, and its leaves were food for mule and burro, and its limbs were good firewood. In places where it did not grow, his animals might find little patches of gramma grass, and where there was not even grass they could live on screw beans, which grow in the driest of sand wastes, and which are as nourishing as oats. Duval did not have to worry about food, but the water problem must be considered always.

Night found him on the edge of the medanos, which stretched before him endlessly, snow-white in the sheen of the huge, low-hanging stars. With ropes of horsehair he hobbled his animals, poured a little water for them from one of his big canteens, and began to break up a palo-fierro branch which had been dragging behind his burro all the way from a distant arroyo. Soon he had coffee boiling over a fire, and on a sheet of tin he was frying tortillas, Mexican fashion, from a paste of meal. There was no meat for him, but on the other side of the medanos, a day or two later, he would shoot a mountain sheep, if he had his usual luck. His mouth watered at the prospect. Mountain sheep was better than venison.

The scorching heat of the day was gone, and the night was just cool enough to be comfortable without a blanket. After his supper he stretched himself out luxuriously on the soft, white sand and turned his face to the stars. He was thinking of the time when he would make his big strike. And at last out of the mysterious dark his voices whispered to him, the same voices that had whispered to hundreds of desert prospectors, urging them on until old age found them poor and disillusioned.

"I'm goin' to make the big strike pretty quick now," Duval muttered, as he dozed off. "That's what them voices are sayin' to me. And then——" Well, then perhaps there might be some corner of the world where he could find contentment.

Suddenly he sat up. He believed he could see something white moving across the sand. Perhaps it was an albino coyote. Perhaps it was nothing. But to Duval's vivid imagination, tricked by the loneliness and the silence and the mystic spell of the desert, it became the ethereal figure of a beautiful woman. With a shudder he closed his eyes and sank back. He did not want to think of women. No woman must ever come into his life. His only ambition could be the finding of gold, and even with wealth he knew that, no matter in what part of the world he might be, there would be a shadow over his life which he could never escape. Bitter thoughts crowded into his mind. Despair tore at his heart. Again he turned his face to the stars, and again the desert voices came to his ears. "Gold!" he muttered.

He must think of nothing else. Every other thought was torture. A warm wind came sighing out of the medanos and lulled him to sleep.

By noon of the following day he was far out in the sand dunes. Not a living thing was in sight, not even a blade of grass, a greasewood bush, or a cactus. Around him on all sides white sand, rifted by the wind, stretched far away like waves of the sea. He could feel the scorching heat of it through his heavy shoes—sand so hot that it would have blistered his fingers had he touched it. Waves of heat rose from it, beating at his face, like blasts from a furnace. Behind him came the mule and the burro.

Alone in a hopeles void he went on. He took a long drink of the warm water of a canteen, then swung himself onto the mule. He wanted to save the animal as much as possible, but the sand had grown soft at that point, and walking was difficult. Anxiously he glanced up at the sun. He must be careful now not to lose his sense of direction, for he knew what it would probably mean to get lost on the medanos. If he succeeded in keeping straight west he would be out of the sand and on the lava beds by night; but even with the aid of his pocket compass it was not at all likely that he would be able to keep such a direct course. There was even danger that he was farther south than he had figured, and he would be on the sand for another day, since the dunes grow wider and wider, as they near the border.

"I reckon I've been a fool," he told himself. "I oughter have waited till night to cross this derned place. But I was sort of afraid of losin' my bearin's in the dark."

Toward the close of the afternoon a line of low, barren hills rose before him. But he knew he was not out of the medanos. On the other side of those hills the bare sand stretched on and on for miles.

Before him in the hard sand was a sight that startled him. Tracks—the tracks of a man. Duval swung out of the saddle and examined them with the eyes of long experience. To the desert man tracks are like a newspaper. They may tell a long story if read properly.

"He's no greaser," Duval decided quickly. "An American sure. Hobnailed shoes! A Mex don't wear that kind. Only light-weight ones for him."

On foot he followed the tracks to the edge of the hills. "Prospector," he concluded. "Nobody else would be goin' into them hills at that point." He was sure of his deduction when he found the tracks going into the hills and coming out at several places. That would be the twisting course that only a prospector would take. Evidently he had been examining the rocks at many points on the hillsides, looking for traces of gold.

Duval turned into a pass through the hills and before long found himself again on the medanos. There again he found the hobnailed tracks in the sand. They were leading on into the west.

"Kind of funny," Duval muttered. "Where's his animals? Prob'ly left 'em hobbled somewheres so's he could prowl round in the rocks, but now he's headin' off across the medanos without 'em. There's full ten miles ahead of him, mebbe twice that fur. How's he goin' to get across without his canteens? I can't figger this puzzle, nohow."

Then suddenly he discovered the answer to it lying before him on the sand. Stooping, he picked up a pair of new blue overalls. A few steps farther on lay a pink shirt.

"The poor hombre's gone loco," he muttered. "That's what they do when the thirst gets 'em—throw away their clothes. He was so busy huntin' gold that he forgot and strayed too fur from his water." Digging his spurs into his tired mule, he followed the tracks.

CHAPTER II.

THE LURE OF HATE.

DUVAL scarcely expected that the tracks would lead him to a living man. For all he knew they might have been there for a week, perhaps a good deal longer. The sand was hard, and it would have taken the winds a long time to obliterate them. Probably no rain had fallen for months. And yet there was just a bare chance that they were fresh. If they were made that day the man might be alive. He would probably live for hours after the delirium of thirst had seized him.

From behind the jagged tips of far-off hills the red ball of the sun was slipping out of sight, and a burning wind rose out of the distant lava beds. Far ahead on the glaring sand dune was a slowly moving speck. Duval believed he knew what this speck was, though at that distance it was like nothing more than a crawling insect. Now and then it stopped, then moved on again. Gradually it began to take form, developing at last into the unmistakable figure of a man. The man staggered, fell, then, as if with desperate effort, dragged himself slowly upright. A little shudder ran through Duval. For the first time the medanos frightened him. Never before had he come into direct contact with the horrors of thirst.

Suddenly a cackling laugh came to his ears. "Gone loco fer sure," he muttered. "He's ravin'."

Half naked, wild-eyed, with mouth hanging open, a human wreck was running toward Duval, beating the air with his outstretched hands. From this wretched creature came a hoarse cry: "Water! Water!"

Sitting rigid in the saddle Duval studied the man. The frantic stranger slipped, fell headlong, reaching out imploring hands. "Water!" came the gasping cry again. But Duval did not move. Suddenly his face had turned as hard as stone, and an angry fire burned in his eyes. The wild figure rose to its knees. "Water!"

"Take a good look at me, hombre," came Duval's rasping voice at last. "Mebbe you'll remember me."

Into the staring, thirst-filmed eyes came a sudden look of recognition. The man burst into insane laughter, which broke at last into hysterical sobs. "Looka my hair!" he cried desperately. "It ain't red." His hair was red as fire. "Jus' looka mine. It's black. I ain't the man. For pity's sake don't hold nothin' agin me! Water! I'm burnin' up, pardner. I'm dyin'!"

"No, you ain't the red-headed one," Duval answered slowly, "but mebbe you'll tell me where that red-headed pal of yourn can be located afore you get any water."

"Pal of mine?" he mutered. "He ain't no more a pal o' mine! He did me dirt, same as he did everybody." The strained voice sank into a hoarse whisper. "I'd like to see you get him, pardner. I'd like to see him lyin' dead somewheres fer the buzzards to pick. Go get him, pardner. You'll find him in San Isidro."

"In San Isidro?" Duval asked slowly, doubtfully. For a moment he studied the man's pleading, desperate face, and then he was convinced that he had heard the truth.

"Water!" The shrill, nerve-wracking whisper stirred Duval into action. After swinging out of the saddle, he unfastened a canteen from the burro. With a last frantic effort the man rose from the sand, staggered forward, and with a piercing cry grasped the canteen, with shaking hands. He drank until Duval pulled the canteen away from him.

"I ain't had more'n a drop, pardner," the man pleaded. "I'm burnin' up."

Duval shook the canteen. "You've had more'n enough," he returned. "Any more'd kill you."

Suddenly the man's legs gave way, and he slipped to the sand in a dead faint. Kneeling beside him, Duval studied him anxiously. Perhaps he was dying. He had heard of men who had been killed by a drink of water after a long thirst. He stared around him. Night was falling. He did not dare to risk losing his way on the dunes in the dark.

"I'll camp here," he decided. "I couldn't get this hombre along with me, anyhow. Mebbe he'll pull through, mebbe not. It don't matter much either way. He ain't nothin' to me."

His lips set in a thin, hard line, and old fires of hate were burning in his eyes. The red-headed man had come into his thoughts again. "In San Isidro!" he muttered. "I'm goin' to find him." The thought thrilled him. "At last I'm goin' to find him!"

Reaching out he picked up the canteen that lay beside him and splashed a little precious water over the gray face that was turned with hideous, gaping mouth to the darkening sky. The eyes opened, staring vacantly, then closed.

Half an hour later Duval forced a little water between the dry lips. Two hours passed, and the man was still unconscious. The night was half gone when Duval, sleeping on the sand, was wakened by his companion's voice. The man was raving in delirium. "Go get him, pardner!" came a shrill whisper. "He's in San Isidro. I wanter to see him lyin' dead, the skunk."

Once more Duval fell asleep, but it was still dark when again the voice roused him. "Gold! I've found tons of it. I'm rich, pardner. Go back into them hills, and somewheres you'll find my bag full o' dust and nuggets. That'll tell yuh the story."

"Ravin' again," Duval grumbled. He got up, gave the man a little water, and then managed to sleep until sunrise. When at last he sat up, blinking at the light, the deathlike silence startled him. He shot a glance at his companion. The sprawling figure lay motionless. There was not even the sound of breathing. Duval sprang up, staring at the rigid, waxen face that lay before him. There was no sign of life, and after a moment of closer scrutiny he knew that again he was alone.

"Gone!" he muttered, as he stooped over the body. "I reckon he passed off satisfied and happy, thinkin' he'd made his big strike." With a shrug of his shoulders he turned away, for the close presence of death was uncanny and terrible in that lonely waste of sand. "No use wastin' time over a dead man," he decided.

Half an hour later he was riding toward the hills he had left the day before, but he was no longer thinking of gold. He was on his way to San Isidro, bringing death to the red-haired man. Now and then he glanced back at the body lying alone on the white sand. He caught sight of a coyote slinking toward it, and far overhead a vulture was swinging in wide circles.

As he passed into the hills, something white lying on the rocks caught his attention. It was the bag his companion had mentioned in his ravings. It proved to be small, but well filled with bits of rotten quartz heavily streaked with gold. At another time such a find might have stirred Duval to enthusiasm, but after scarcely more than a glance at its contents he stuffed the bag into the roll of blankets at the back of his saddle and dismissed it from his mind. Some day he could come back to these hills and search for wealth, but he would rather kill the red-haired man at San Isidro first.

Before evening the hills had faded out of sight behind him. Again he was far out on the medanos. Some time the next day he would be out of the sand and would turn toward the Sonora border, where San Isidro lay.

Long after darkness had closed in

around him, he began to imagine that again he heard his desert voices. But the voices were harsher and more insistent now, and they no longer spoke of gold. They were reminding him of the past and rousing all the sleeping devils of his nature. They were urging him on to hunt for the red-haired man. Never before had the voices seemed so real to him, and he peered into the dark, half expecting to find that some specter or some living human being was calling across the sand. But he could see nothing but the snow-white, billowy medanos and, hanging closely over it, a sea-blue sky, where huge, orange-colored stars swung low and seemed to sway in the wind like lanterns.

CHAPTER III.

THE MARK OF THE THIEF.

THE darkness of another evening was gathering swiftly around him when at last he drew near to his goal. He had ridden a long way from the spot where he had left the dead prospector, and he had come fast, for he had left his burro and pack far behind at a Papago rancheria, where he knew and could trust one of the medicine men. Now in front of him, from a gap in barren hills, soft lights shone. They were the lights of San Isidro.

From close ahead he detected the rhythmic ring of a horse's hoofs on the sandy trail, and with a sudden longing for human companionship he spurred his mule to a faster pace. A moment later on the crest of a low ridge ahead of him a horse and rider were silhouetted against the sky. With wide, startled eyes Duval stared at the slim figure on the horse. It was a girl. With that unexpected and disconcerting discovery he slowed the mule to a walk.

"A girl!" he grunted in disgust. And she was a white girl! He had seen the glint of starlight on golden hair.

For more than two years no white woman had been within many miles of Joe Duval, and he had been glad of it. Realizing the bleak, desolate life he must always lead, shunned and despised wherever he might go, he had tried, and sometimes with desperate effort, to keep women out of his thoughts. It seemed now like a bitter joke of fate that this girl had been put in his path on the very edge of his goal, while the fires of hate and the longing for revenge were burning in his veins.

So, in spite of his eagerness to get to San Isidro, he held back. To him the girl was a menace to be avoided at any cost. The horse was moving slowly, and Duval, try as he would, could not keep his fascinated eyes from its rider. "A white girl!" he said to himself again and again, and he could feel his heart pounding against his side with the thrill of an experience that had not come to him in years. He had almost forgotten what white women looked like, and this slender, graceful figure on the horse appealed to him. She seemed a mysterious personification of all the joy of living that had been denied to him. Gradually the temptation to draw nearer grew stronger and stronger.

Perhaps he would have succeeded in avoiding this menacing lure, if the girl had not suddenly pulled up her horse and swung from the saddle. It was at that moment that she caught sight of the man behind her. He was lost. There was no escape for him now, and with tight-set lips he rode slowly toward her. Then the sound of her voice startled and thrilled him. To this lonely wanderer from the bad lands it was the voice of an angel, such a voice as sometimes had called to him from the night winds of the sand dunes. Yet the girl's words were surely commonplace enough, and the purport of them brought him out of his trance.

"I think my saddle's slipping," she announced. "Would you mind pulling up the girths for me?"

Duval swung to the ground and stole one furtive, timid glance at her. The glance assured him that a few moments before his eyes had not been deceptive. Her hair was golden. And he made the further discovery that her eyes were dark, and that she was undeniably pretty in spite of the firm, determined lines of mouth and chin.

"Yes'm, I'll—I'll do that much," stammered Duval. With shaking fingers he unfastened the straps of the girths and drew them tight, with a force that brought from the horse fierce grunts of protest.

"Thank you," she said. "There's surely nothing wrong with your muscles. That's a good job you've made of it. I put the saddle on myself, and I didn't have the strength to pull the straps tight enough. The trail gets pretty steep sometimes in those hills over yonder, and the girths have to be as tight as a drum to keep a saddle from slipping."

"Yes'm, I reckon so." He found himself at a loss for words. If she had been a Papago woman, his tongue would have wagged freely enough, but he had lost the art of conversation with any such bewilderingly fascinating creature as this. His face was turned away from her; indeed, not once had he faced her squarely, but he felt that she was studying him curiously. He was glad that the darkness helped to screen his embarrassment.

"You're not from Isidro?" she asked after a long pause.

Duval shook his head.

"From some ranch?" she persisted.

"Well—no ma'am. I'm from up in the malpas country."

The girl raised her eyebrows and glanced at him sharply. "Oh, I see. A prospector."

"Yes'm, I reckon so."

"And now you're going to try your luck down here?"

"Yes'm, I'm going to try my luck down here."

"You'd better not," she returned with a shake of her head. "There isn't a speck of gold hereabouts. Even the Indian dry washers gave up the hunt long ago."

"I reckon I'll find what I'm after," Duval muttered sullenly.

The girl seemed puzzled. "Oh, well," she said after a moment of silence, "I guess you're one of these desert-mystery men. Keep as mum as an oyster if you want to; I'm not trying to pry into your secrets." Turning away from him she hoisted herself into her saddle.

Duval mounted his mule, and for a while they rode along together in silence. The girl was frowning over her thoughts. She could not understand why this stranger kept his face turned so persistently away from her. She had managed to see only his profile. So far as her observation had gone, his appearance was attractive, but his peculiar manner gave her a slight feeling of uneasiness. She knew that down in that border country it was dangerous not to be on one's guard against strangers, and she was relieved to see that the lights of San Isidro were so near.

"I didn't know they wus many white women down here in San Isidro," Duval said at last.

"Not many—half a dozen. I'm from the Yavapai country. I haven't been down here very long."

After a long silence Duval spoke again. "This is the fust time I've laid eyes on a white woman in more'n two years," he said hoarsely.

With a little gasp the girl turned to him. "What!" she cried. "You mean to say you've been up there in those bad lands all that time without a break?"

"Yes'm." His voice was shaking with the force of long pent-up emotions. "Two long years and more—two years of solitude! I'm tellin' you, ma'am, it feels good to see a white girl again."

The girl stared at him with a little shudder. "Two years!" she whispered.

"How dreadful! I've heard about those bad lands. Two years of that kind of life isn't good for a young fellow like you. It's a wonder it didn't drive you mad."

"It pretty nigh did sometimes," he mumbled, as if to himself. "For months at a stretch I've had nobody to talk to but this old mule o' mine and a burro, and conversation with them two animals ain't so very stimulatin'. I reckon I'd have forgot how to talk with white folks 'ceptin' for the storekeeper at Horsehead, that I useter visit once in a couple o' moons."

With a sudden impulse of pity the girl reached out and pressed his hand. "Oh, you poor boy!" she exclaimed.

Duval started, as if an electric shock had run through him. The soft, warm touch of her fingers had stirred every nerve in his body. He choked down a sob. And then, getting control of himself at last, his mouth drew into a hard, thin, bitter line. The lights of San Isidro were close before them now. He felt that to-night, in a few minutes, perhaps, this girl would turn from him in dread and loathing. He knew it would be impossible to keep from her the secret that had made him an outcast and had wrecked his life.

"But I can't understand!" she burst out. "Why did you do it, a young fellow like you? Even old, white-haired prospectors never stay more than a few weeks at a time in that terrible country."

"I didn't wanter to see folks," he muttered, "and 'fore long I got kind o' used to the loneliness."

The girl was clever enough to sense a tragedy somewhere in the past life of her companion, and she did not pursue the inquiry. Her gaze rested abstractedly on the cluster of white, adobe buildings that comprised the little settlement.

"Well, we're here," she announced.

Slowly they rode into the main street of San Isidro.

"You ever hear of a feller folks called Yuma Joe Duval?" he demanded suddenly.

The girl puckered her forehead. "Yes, I think so," she answered. "A bandit."

From the window of a store a bright flood of lamplight fell upon them, and in this glare Duval, with a desperate resolution, turned his head and faced her squarely. The girl glanced at him for a bare instant, then turned to him again in a wild, wondering stare. Suddenly she shrank away with a startled gasp. Down the left side of her companion's face, showing vividly white in the lamplight, ran from cheek bone to jawbone a perfectly formed letter T, deeply branded. And to anybody who knew the black past of this man that letter stood for the word thief.

"Yuma Joe!" he cried out to her with a bitter laugh. "That's me."

CHAPTER IV.

THE RED-HAIRED MAN.

AT the moment of Duval's exposure of his past, the mule, stung by the spurs of its rider, plunged forward, and the next instant the girl found herself alone.

Yuma Joe rode on to the other side of the village, where, after some search, he found a Mexican's stable. Here he could leave his animal for the night. He had set out to explore the little streets of San Isidro on foot, when the door of a cantina which he was passing, was flung open, and the thin, dapper figure of a young man emerged from within. At this man Duval stared with growing interest. He found something familiar about the stranger's appearance, and a moment later, as the light from a window fell upon the white, small-featured face, which was adorned with a little black mustache, Duval recognized him. He was "Slim" Morbeck, professional card player from Yuma, who

evidently had been lured to try his luck at this isolated spot on the border by the tales of easy money to be made in San Isidro's wide-open gambling hall.

At the sound of steps close behind him, Morbeck turned quickly around. His jaw dropped, and a bewildered look came into his little ferret eyes, as he found himself face to face with Duval.

"Yuma Joe!" he gasped. "Is it you or your ghost? I heard you was dead. That's what folks have been sayin' up along the railroad."

"I been pretty nigh as good as dead, Slim," returned Duval. "Been out gold huntin' in the malpais. Reckon you know what that means."

Morbeck nodded assent, though he had scarcely heeded the words. His sharply observant, prying eyes had discovered the branded letter, and he was staring at it in open-mouthed wonder. Noting the menacing look in Duval's eyes and the heavy six-shooter that hung in his belt, he choked back a tactless comment that had been on the tip of his tongue. In the nick of time he had remembered that Duval's hand could find its way to that gun with uncanny speed, and his skill as a marksman was pretty generally conceded.

"We'll mosey back into the cantina and have a talk," Morbeck suggested.

They turned into the low-roofed, evil-smelling adobe resort, where Duval, always conscious now in these human surroundings of the hideous mark on his face, selected a table in the darkest corner.

"Joe, I can't help noticin' that face o' yours," declared Morbeck, his curiosity getting the better of his caution after he had called for tequila.

An angry fire burned in Duval's eyes, and his face flushed a deep red, leaving the white brand more conspicuous than ever. "Mebbe now you'll understand why I been spendin' two years up in the malpais," he returned at last. "I didn't have the nerve to show up anywheres with this on me," he added hoarsely, touching the scar gingerly with the tips of his fingers. "And it put me out o' the crooked game for good and all. A poor cuss with a mark like this could never get away with crooked jobs. He'd be tracked as easy as a belled cow." Now that he had begun, it seemed easy to tell his story. After keeping it to himself for two long years, it was a relief to share it even with such a man as Morbeck, with whom he had never been on particularly friendly terms.

"How'd it happen, Joe?" the gambler interposed eagerly.

"It was up in the Yavapai country," Duval went on. "Out on the range I ran across a big, bull-necked, red-haired cuss and his partner. The red-headed one swore I'd stole his cayuse. I didn't happen to be guilty that trip, but that didn't help me none, so long's I couldn't prove it. They had a fire goin' for their grub, and an old round-up outfit had happened to leave behind 'em a brandin' iron. The red-headed one was ravin' at me like a madman. With his temper roused he was more like a beast than a human bein'. He stuck the iron in the fire and swore he'd mark me so folks'd know fer the rest o' my life what I was." His voice fell to a whisper, and he buried his face in his hands. "I reckon you can figger out what happened without my doin' any more explainin'," he added weakly.

"Why didn't you go back and shoot the cuss?" Morbeck demanded.

"I never could find him," Duval explained. "The two of 'em was strangers in that part o' the country. All I found out about 'em was that they was prospectors, and that sometimes they drifted down to the malpais. I knew it was there that I'd meet one or the other of 'em some time."

"And you did?" Morebeck put in.

"Yeah, the wrong one. But I know where the red-headed one is now. He's down here in San Isidro."

"A big, bad-tempered, red-headed hombre," Morbeck mused, as he toyed with his glass. "That'd be 'Bull' Gunderson. You'll find him. He's here all right."

The little gambler studied his companion from half-closed, furtive eyes. Morbeck's was not a face that one could trust instinctively, and Duval, as he watched its quick, subtle changes of expression, half regretted that he had taken the man into his confidence.

"Joe, lemme give yuh a tip," the gambler resumed after a few moments of silence. "Keep outa trouble and let somebody else do the killin' of Gunderson."

"Whadda yuh think I am, you runt!" Duval burst out savagely.

"Oh, that's all right, Joe, but lemme explain," Morbeck hastened to add in soothing tones. "Gunderson's made too many enemies to be safe. You ain't the first cuss he's manhandled. And now at last that wild temper of his has been the ruin of him. That's why he's down here now, hidin'. He knows there's more'n one man bent on gettin' him, and that he wouldn't be safe up north."

Duval laughed harshly. "You got queer notions, Morbeck," he commented. "Is that the kind of a hombre you are, lettin' other folks do your dirty work for you?"

The gambler did not resent the question. A soft little smile twitched his slender mustache. "I can't see the use of gettin' in bad when you don't have to," he returned. "Just wait a while and think it over. Mebbe you'll get more sensible."

"That'll be 'bout enough advice from you, Slim," growled Duval, rising and turning toward the door. "S'long. I'm goin 'to do some prowlin' round the town. If I come across this Gunderson—well, I reckon you can figger what'll happen."

Left alone, Slim Morbeck sat smiling softly to himself and pulling at his mustache. Five minutes later he went out. At about the same time at the farther end of the street Duval caught sight of Gunderson. The red-haired man was alone and on foot. He had not seen Duval, and he was making his way with careless, shuffling gait through the dark, apparently oblivious of danger.

Duval's gun was ready in his hand. He raised it, his finger at the trigger, and then he hesitated. The thought had suddenly flashed into mind that such a quick and easy death would be too good an ending for the man who had ruined him. Two years of waiting ought to bring him a better revenge than this. Gunderson should suffer, as he himself had suffered. Somehow he would make life bitter to this red-haired man. Slipping the revolver back into his belt he turned away.

CHAPTER V.

GUNDERSON'S DAUGHTER.

A MOMENT later, Slim Morbeck appeared once more before Duval. Hidden by the darkness the man from the malpais stood and watched him. The gambler was crossing the road and was following Gunderson.

"Huh!" Duval grunted in perplexity. "Looks like Slim was trailin' him. I can't figger it nohow."

With quick, nervous steps little Morbeck drew closer and closer to the big, lumbering man ahead of him. Gunderson turned, discovered him, and stood waiting. Then the two moved on together.

"Well, I'll be derned!" growled Duval. "So he's a friend o' Gunderson, eh! I allus thought that little runt looked kind of slippery. He sure fooled me good. And now he's spillin' what I've been tellin' him. I reckon the red-headed hombre ain't the only one I'll soon be settlin' accounts with."

Acting on a sudden resolution he started to follow the two men, moving

toward them through the dark, with the long, swift, easy steps of the wanderers of the bad lands. The unpaved road was of soft sand, and he could draw near to them in silence. There were no street lights in San Isidro, and he could follow close behind them and within hearing of their voices, with scarcely a chance of being discovered. He held himself at such a distance that they would not be likely to hear him, and yet he was so near to them that in the heavy silence of the night he could overhear every word of their conversation. But what came to his ears was not what he expected. He himself had apparently not been mentioned. It was a wholly different subject that Morbeck had broached.

"I dunno what you've got against me, Bull," came the soft voice of the gambler. "You ain't so particular that you're worryin' about my makin' a livin' from the cards, are you? Because, if that's what's in the wind, you're a fine kind of a bird to hold that against me. I know a whole lot that's worse'n that about you. You've never been an angel, Gunderson."

"No, and I never pretended to be one," came the retort. "But it don't make no diff'runce what I am, or what I've ever been. You've allus had a bad name, Morbeck, and I ain't goin' to stand for any such proposition as you've been makin'."

The gambler's voice suddenly grew harsh. "No?" he returned sharply. "Well, sposin' I get the girl anyhow? Then you'll have to stand for it."

A growl of rage rumbled in Gunderson's big throat. "I'd have to, eh!" he roared. "Now you jus' listen to me, you slippery little snake, and see that you don't forget what I'm tellin' yuh. Instead of standin' for it I'd break every bone in your body. D'ye get that?"

Morbeck shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I don't think you would, Gunderson," he said softly. "I got a card in my hand that I ain't played yet. Mebbe you can guess what that card is, Bull."

"I ain't tryin' to do no guessin'," Gunderson returned.

For a moment the gambler hesitated. Then a sharp note of determination crept into his voice. "You're powerful fond of that daughter o' yours, Bull," he said with a note of ugly menace, "but mebbe there's somebody else you're even more fond of."

Abruptly the big man halted and with a quick turn faced the gambler squarely. Duval could hear the sharp intake of Gunderson's breath, could even see the swaying of the huge, ungainly body, the quick clenching of the powerful fists. "What d'ye mean by that?" he demanded in a harsh whisper, while he seemed to be making a mighty effort to control himself.

"I mean this, Gunderson," the little gambler returned promptly with an air of unshaken confidence, "that I happen to know somethin' about that other somebody that you're so fond of, that I happen to know enough to——"

The grip of a giant hand choked the remainder of the disclosure back into his throat. A half-stifled cry of terror broke from Morbeck, and Gunderson turned him loose. The trembling gambler felt of his throat with cautious fingers. "You try that again," he gasped, "and I'll show pronto what kind of cards I'm holdin'. I got you dead to rights, Bull. You better quit stallin' and give in."

"You think you've got me, but you ain't," Gunderson returned. "You think I'm afraid to kill yuh, you little rat, but I ain't. I figger it's me that's got the high hand, Morbeck, in this game, for I ain't afraid to die, and you are. And you know I'll kill yuh if I have to."

The gambler seemed to consider this terse summary of the situation and to appreciate the logic of it. He changed his plan of attack. His manner softened

perceptibly. "S'posin' Rita wants to marry me, Bull," he suggested. "You wouldn't stand in the way then, would yuh?"

"S'posin' Rita wants yuh!" Gunderson returned with a sneer. "Huh! You derned little fool, you're s'posin' somethin' that ain't possible. You ain't figgered that she'd ever want a little crook like you, have yuh?"

"You won't get anywheres by callin' names, Bull," Morbeck observed icily with unruffled composure.

"And you're not goin' to get anywheres anyway," retorted Gunderson.

The two men were moving slowly on again, Duval still close behind them. In front of the door of a neat adobe house they halted. The door swung open, and in the oblong of light stood a girl. From his concealment in the heavy darkness Duval stared at her, and his heart sank, as he realized that this was Gunderson's daughter. She was the girl, the consoling touch of whose hands he had believed he could never forget, with whom he had ridden into San Isidro.

CHAPTER VI.

MORBECK'S MIND AT WORK.

THAT night Joe Duval spent out in the hills alone. When in the early morning he strolled back into San Isidro his eyes were heavy, his drawn face a picture of misery. He had slept but little. All night long Rita Gunderson had been in his thoughts, presenting a problem that was far beyond his power to solve. For breakfast he went into the cantina, where he had first met Morbeck, and there he found the gambler waiting for him. Morbeck's greeting was effusive. He insisted that Duval should share his table.

Duval decided that he did not want to quarrel with this wily, dangerous little man, and he was diplomatic enough to give no indication that he had discovered his relations with Gunderson. He chose to take this opportunity of trying to discover what sort of cards were in the gambler's hand. Morbeck was not slow in disclosing the underlying motive of his eagerness for Duval's companionship. He waited only until the chocolate-colored Mexican proprietor of the establishment was well out of hearing distance before broaching the subject that seemed to be uppermost in his mind.

"You look like you been doin' some hard thinkin', Joe," the gambler began affably, as he sipped his coffee.

"Yeah, I been doin' some thinkin' all right," Duval returned with slow precision.

"Did it get yuh anywhere? Morbeck persisted.

"I dunno as it did."

Morbeck lit a cigarette and watched his companion closely from under drooping eyelids. "Joe, you're a pretty dangerous sort of a cuss," he said at last, "and you've come down here to kill a man. I've got a game of my own to play, and I don't mean cards. It's a derned sight harder game than the cards ever gave me. S'posin' you and me goes into partnership in what we're trying to do. You help me, and, after you've killed Gunderson, I'll help you to make your get-away. Mebbe you'll never even need to make a get-away. I could plan the job clever enough so's they could never fasten it on yuh. You're headin' for serious trouble if you try the job alone. There ain't much law down here in San Isidro, but a derned long and cantankerous arm o' the law reaches down from up north, whenever folks take to cold murder."

Duval stirred his coffee in silence, as he pondered the proposition. "What are yuh up to, Slim," he asked at last. "Show me what's on your mind. I dunno as I wanter go into your game with my eyes shut."

Morbeck hesitated. Dubiously he studied his companion's face. "All right," he agreed after a long silence.

"I'll show my hand to yuh. This is the way things stand, Joe." He leaned forward over the table, and his voice sank almost to a whisper. "Bull Gunderson's got a daughter. I'm after the daughter, and you wanta croak the old man. But I've figgered that it won't be helpin' my game none to have Gunderson killed off just yet. Wait till I give the word."

Under the table Duval dug the nails of his fingers deep into his palms. He was trying to suppress a sudden impulse to throttle the little man who sat facing him. "I don't quite get yuh, Slim," he said at last with an effort.

"No?" returned Morbeck with a look of surprise. "I sure thought I was makin' it all clear enough."

"Mebbe, but if the girl wants to marry yuh, what pertic'ler diffrunce does it make whether Gunderson's put out o' the way now or later?"

"I dunno as I wanter to go into all that," protested Morbeck. "It ain't necessary."

"I ain't goin' inter the thing blind, Slim. I gotta know just what's doin'."

The gambler considered his decision for a long time, as he slowly puffed his cigarette and studied his companion. "All right. I'll spill the beans," he agreed with sudden alertness. "In the first place you're all wrong 'bout Rita Gunderson wantin' to marry me. She don't wanter—not even a little bit. But I've got a way of bringin' pressure to bear."

Duval's eyes flashed. "Goin' to force her to have yuh, eh," he said sharply. "How yuh goin' ter do it, Slim?"

The gambler smiled softly. "Gunderson's not only got a daughter," he began to explain, "he's got a son, too. And he thinks more o' that ornery son than of his own life."

"Yeah? What's the son got to do with your game?"

"He don't know nothin' about my game. He's too busy thinkin' of his own troubles to bother with anybody else's. Up in Santa Fe there's a life sentence for murder hangin' over him, and now he's down here in San Isidro hidin'. I happened to tumble across that little secret just by fool luck."

Duval's face clouded.

"So that's why the old man and the daughter are livin' down here," Morebeck resumed. "Bull wants ter be with his son, and he's figgered that the son's gotta stick down here in this border country for the rest of his life. He might get into Mexico, but the greasers have got a nasty way of spottin' American runaways and sendin' 'em back, after notifyin' our gover'ment about 'em. There ain't so very much chance of young Jim Gunderson bein' found way down here unless I choose to give the tip; and, if I get his sister, I ain't figgerin' on doin' no squealin'."

"You're a rotten kind of a skunk," Duval growled with a sneer.

Morbeck was impervious to such characterizations of himself. He smiled blandly. "Sure I am when I have to be," he returned glibly. "I gotta get the girl somehow, Joe, and I can't be too perticler 'bout how I do it."

"You've told her you'll spill the news 'bout her brother if she don't marry you?"

"Sure thing. She's been doin' a lot o' stallin', but I've got her cornered."

"I ain't quite doped out yet how the old man comes inter the propersition, Slim," said Duval.

"No, nor me either," Morbeck exclaimed with a puzzled frown. "That's the end of it that's got me guessin'. If I marry the girl, the old man'll murder me, and that ain't just the kind o' weddin' bells I want. And if I spill the news 'bout young Jim, the old man'll murder me jus' the same. But with the old man outer the way—well, then that little puzzle'd be solved good and proper. But then they'd be another problem. The girl ain't any too fond o' that no-good brother of hers, and she's got some

funny ideas 'bout the sin of goin' again the law and helpin' him to hide. And yet she don't want him sent to prison on account o' the old man. She knows it'd kill old Bull if the boy went behind the bars. And she thinks a powerful lot o' that old man. She'd marry me to save him instead of just to save the boy, and to save old Bull the boy's gotta be kept outer prison. And s'posin' you croak Bull. The figgerin' seems to show that the girl wouldn't have no particular object in marryin' me, with him outer the way. I can marry the girl if Bull's alive, but I'll get murdered fer doin' it. And with Bull dead I can't marry her. I dunno whether I want the old man to live or die. It's a mighty complicated layout, Joe. It's got me pretty nigh dippy. But there's allus a way out of a puzzle like that, if a man thinks hard enough. I'm beginnin' to see light. I b'lieve I've got the answer."

"You're a pretty smart little hombre, Slim," Duval interposed.

"If I wasn't I'd starve to death. I've allus had to live on my wits. But mebbe you can see the answer yourself, Joe."

Duval shook his head. "I give it up," he returned. "What is it?"

"Simple as rollin' off a log. I marry the girl, and you croak the old man before he finds time to murder me."

"I'll think it over, Slim. There's a hull lot o' thinkin' I've gotta be doin'."

A look of sharp suspicion came into the gambler's little eyes. Something about Duval's manner aroused his distrust. He was almost sorry that he had broached his plan to this dubious, moody outcast of the bad lands.

CHAPTER VII.

A WAY OUT.

AFTER leaving Morbeck in the cantina, Duval wandered off alone to figure out his own complicated problem. Never for a moment had he felt the slightest inclination to help the gambler carry out his plan. And now he resolved to do what he could to save Rita Gunderson from the web that Morbeck was spinning for her. Perhaps it would be better to kill the old man without delay, he reasoned, if that would save the daughter. But the intricacies of Morbeck's story bewildered him. He had no way of telling where falsehood might lie in what the gambler had told him. Morbeck might have been trying to trick him. By killing Gunderson now he might be playing into the little man's hands. But he could find no flaw in Morbeck's account of the situation, and second thought convinced him that the gambler had been telling the truth in every particular. His story dovetailed accurately with the conversation he had overheard between Morbeck and Gunderson. Surely it would be better to put the old man out of the way now. He didn't care for the gambler's help in making a get-away. Perhaps he could escape unaided; perhaps not. He was willing to take his chances. And Morbeck had spoken of other enemies who were hunting for Gunderson. Perhaps that was true. If so, one of these men might appear at any moment in San Isidro and rob him of revenge.

As he wandered through the streets of the village, a girl's voice suddenly startled him out of the absorption of his thoughts. With a quick turn he found himself facing Rita Gunderson. His face flushed. Instinctively he flung a hand over his branded cheek.

"You needn't have run away from me the other night," she began reprovingly, looking him squarely in the eyes. "I wasn't affaid of you, and perhaps I didn't hold so bad an opinion of you as you thought. You aren't the same Yuma Joe that folks used to talk about up north years ago. You're a different man. I'm sure of it. All the devils that were in you were driven out in those lonely years up there in the malpais."

"You—believe that?" he stammered.

The girl leaned toward him, and he stood staring into her face, fascinated, spellbound. "Yes, I believe that," she answered softly. "I believe I can read you as plain as a book, Yuma Joe. I've been thinking what your life must have been these last two years. I've been trying to imagine what those days and nights must have been up there alone on the lava and the sand dunes."

Duval choked down a sob. He could feel his whole body trembling. The girl's voice seemed to stir all the hidden depths of his starved soul. The conviction seized him that the voice that was now sounding in his ears had come to him on many a night out of the winds of the medanos.

"And, Joe," the girl resumed, "I know now how you got that brand. I know who put it on you. It was my own father. He's already told me so. And he's sorry for it now. He found out too late that you weren't the man who had robbed him."

Duval's lips twitched, and he turned his face away from her to hide the storm of emotions that was sweeping over him. At that moment he caught sight of a man watching them with strange intentness from the other side of the road. It was Slim Morbeck. The girl, too, discovered the little gambler, and her face turned white.

"Good-by," she said with sudden decision, holding out her hand. "I know this isn't going to be the last time we'll meet."

"No, ma'am, it ain't going to be the last time," said Yuma Joe. "I'll be watchin' for yuh."

He stood looking after her until she was lost to sight at the end of the road; then he crossed over to where Morbeck was waiting.

"You're a pretty smooth article yourself, Duval, ain't yuh," he remarked gently. "I hadn't figgered you had brains enough to double-cross me."

"I reckon I ain't goin' to be helpin' you to play your game, Morbeck," returned Duval sharply.

"I've discovered that much without your tellin' me," Morbeck retorted quickly. "I got eyes in my head. But I guess I won't be needing any help from you, Joe. I can play my cards without you. And I can win with 'em, too."

The two men separated, and again Duval became absorbed in his thoughts. "I ain't goin' to kill Bull Gunderson," he told himself at last—"Not now, or ever."

CHAPTER VIII.

SLIM MORBECK'S LAST CARD.

FOR a full week Slim Morbeck kept his thoughts strictly to himself. Then one night young Juan Silva, a runner for the gambling hall, came into the cantina and found Morbeck sitting there alone. Silva and the gambler were bosom friends. Morbeck had been drinking heavily. His little eyes were inflamed, his face bloated.

"I seen that girl of yours just now walking with that man with the scar," Silva announced.

"Yes?" said Morbeck gently. It was very rarely that he betrayed any emotion, but the young Mexican's words had jarred him perceptibly. "Sit down, Juan. Make yuhself comf'table. Have a drink."

"I thought you was going to marry that girl, Slim," Silva persisted. "It don't look much like it now to me."

Morbeck rose unsteadily to his feet. An angry light was in his eyes. "S'posin' we move along and look for that branded hombre, Juan," he suggested.

Together they went out into the street. "Where'd you see 'em, Juan?" Morbeck demanded.

"Not fur from here, but the girl's prob'ly home by this time. P'raps he's there with her."

"Then that'll be where we're headin' for," said Morbeck, and the two moved on toward Gunderson's house. Arriving there, Silva stole softly up to a front window and peered inside. After a moment he nodded to his companion, and Morbeck crept cautiously up beside him. Together they stared into a room in which were the girl, Duval, and young Jim Gunderson.

Suddenly the sound of a shot rang out into the still night. Instantly Duval sprang from the chair, where he was sitting close to young Gunderson, and pulled a gun from his belt. In quick succession he fired six shoots at the broken window, while an answering volley came from outside.

With an hysterical cry Rita Gunderson dropped to her knees beside the fallen body of her brother, which lay in the center of the floor, with a bullet hole directly between the eyes. The young fugitive's worries and fears had been ended for him far more quickly and certainly than he had ever dared to hope for.

Outside there was only silence now, and Duval stole cautiously to the window. Close against the outer wall of the house lay a motionless figure. It was the dead body of Slim Morbeck. Juan Silva had disappeared.

A stream of crimson was running from Duval's face and trickling to the floor. He clapped a hand over his cheek. Then suddenly the girl rose to her feet and discovered his wound. Across the mark of the branding iron a bullet had cut a long furrow deep into the flesh, almost obliterating the hideous letter.

"Joe!" the girl cried wildly. "It's gone!"

"Gone?" he echoed, turning to her in bewilderment. "What'dye mean?"

"The brand—the bullet wiped it out. The scar will never shame you any more, for you have been healed with the cleansing bullet. You're no longer an outcast of the malpais."

PONY EXPRESS TO BE REVIVED FOR BIG CELEBRATION

THE purpose of the Pony Express celebration, which is to be held in September, is to help keep alive the spirit of the great plains, and incidentally to commemorate the aniversary of the discovery of gold in California in forty-nine. W. R. Stubbs, former governor of Missouri, who is on the committee in charge of the celebration said: "The spirit of the West made this country what it is. That spirit must be preserved. Without it we cannot be the great, free country that we are." Mr. Stubbs has talked with many of the old-timers who used to ride the plains and has gladly accepted their offers to participate in the celebration. It is planned to have pony riders start from St. Joseph, Missouri, in time to reach San Francisco September 10th, the anniversary of the discovery of gold. They will break the trip into several relays, as in the days when the Middle West was only a boundless prairie. En route they will pick up messages of governors, mayors, generals, and other prominent men, to be carried to Frisco. Topeka, Kansas, Leavenworth, Lawrence, Abilene, and Salina, Kansas, will be on the route of the Pony Express riders. The trail will then proceed over the Rockies and into the Golden State. The riders who first reach certain cities, and perform other feats in the transcontinental race, will receive prizes, and to the man who is the first to arrive in San Francisco, there will be a special prize in recognition of his accomplishment. Acting on the committee with ex-Governor Stubbs, who is the sole Kansas representative, are delegates from the States west of the Missouri River. "Pawnee Bill"—Major Gordon W. Lillie—represents Oklahoma. He was one of "Buffalo Bill's" pals. He is to be one of the riders in the Pony Express, and will lay a wreath on the grave of his deceased partner in Denver. James D. Phelan, former senator from California, is chairman of the committee.

Hopping Help

By

John Briggs

Author of "Fair Enough," "A Fool and His Horse," etc.

SURELY in vain the net is spread, in sight of any bird. So are the ways of every one that is greedy for gain, which taketh away the life of the owners thereof!"

The words were croaked from a throat that was parched. They were high-pitched and edged with fanatic fever. They died in a limitless, molten stillness.

A dull rhythmic creak of wooden pack saddles accompanied the sudden burst of speech. The younger partner, powerfully built, dust coated, sun baked, shuffled wearily in the wake of two disconsolate, plodding mules. He offered no response to the remark of the older man who hobbled ahead on a wooden peg and one sturdy leg, directing their short caravan over Death Valley's alkaline floor. For eleven months he had heard hardly any human speech, except that of his one-legged partner, quoting proverbs. Their prospect had not panned out, and he was disgusted and weary.

With an occasional whack at the rump of the rear mule, he dragged himself moodily along. By day he sought relief from his partner's everlasting proverbs by mumbling counteractive curses. He cursed without distinct sound; for he did not care to invoke further proverbial reproof.

Daniel McCunne, whose society had so sickened him of ancient King Solomon's sayings, knew all the proverbs by heart. He could repeat them forwards or backwards, all in their order, or all out of order to suit the occasion. He was heralded from Panamint to Gold Mountain as "Singing Solomon." Indeed, wherever the desert lay, men had proclaimed him merrily "the sage."

The younger man sullenly regretted having staked the price of his little homestead against the old desert rat's prospects in the Grape Vine Mountains. Not that he was a poor loser; it was the proverbs that had stirred up his innermost resentment. The humor of them had long since worn off, and he had begun to take the matter personally. He was glad that their partnership would last only until they could reach Emigrant and go their separate ways.

They snailed on across a dry salt sea, level as glass, blinding white. The dust lazily volumed up, hung still, burned in the four pairs of eyes that were past feeling, stifled the lungs which were slowly clogging.

A high quaver again assaulted the eternal silence. "Let thine eyes look straight before thee!" The sage wore a sun-bleached duster that fell short of his good knee. It flared out at the edge and hung from the shoulders like the skirt of a dancing dervish. Lifting his gaze from the shadow which the garment cast before him, McCunne suited his action to the words just quoted. Blinking the dust film from his pale blue optics, he stared painfully into the smoldering vista beyond. Then he turned abruptly about and continued his forward movement by a sidling hobble.

"Jed, mon, look'ee yonder ta th' front av us," he directed. "Wha' kin ye make av yon wee speck? Dos't be movin'? I canna see sa weel f'r th' doost."

Jed Lorry squinted along the general line of McCunne's meandering forefinger. Mirrored in the warping heat waves was a wavering dark splotch. Dizzily it appeared to cavort on the edge of a glimmering mirage. Like the inchoate figment of a dream, it altered in size and shape, danced, shrank and disappeared. As some fantastic nebulosity, it provokingly blinked out when Lorry strained to watch it, reappeared when he relaxed his vision.

"Yeh—it's movin'," hesitated Lorry. "It's uh man—on foot. He ain't walkin' straight."

"Urge th' beasties wi' yer strop," directed the quoter of proverbs. "We'll noodge alang ta see if un be needin' aid."

The quickening of his limp was barely perceptible, but it was enough to require the driver's shouted oaths and repeated application of the strap to make the pace of the mules equal it. The ex-homesteader shifted his rifle strap from his right shoulder to his left. Movement was a struggle against inertia, but the peg-legged old Scot gave no sign that he was affected by the heat.

"He that walketh uprightly shall be saved," wheezed the sage, "but he that is perverse in his ways shall fall at once!"

The mules lagged and McCunne increased his lead apace. At times his mumblings were low and indistinct, at other times volcanic. He perceived his partner's weakening. Whirling about, he waited until Lorry had regained the lap, then he jerked aloft his right hand, palm opened.

"Ha' ye become sa weak in sin," he chided shrilly, "that ye canna hasten ta aid a fellow mon in distress?"

"I ain't no more weak in sin than yuh are yerself, yuh ole hippercrit," snapped the glowering partner. "T' hell with yuh!"

"Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise," quoth the sage, stumping ahead with renewed vigor.

They need not have hurried. The human silhouette did not progres like a man who is bent on reaching a given point. He began a detour which led him finally toward them, though he was doubtless unaware of them until they had come up to where he had fallen, face down, and was whipping himself about in the crystalline dust.

He had been a man of large stature. Sweat streaks in his faded overalls and threadbare shirt marked the pattern of muscles which had once made the garments fit snugly. A leather thong about his shrunken waist held in place the useless folds of clothing. The soles of his boots were worn through to the skin of his frenziedly kicking feet. Wispy gray curls hung down to the rent in his shirt which stretched from shoulder to shoulder. A flopping old Stetson, askew on his head, was held by a chin strap.

There came to the ears of McCunne and Lorry the quavered words of a strange old ditty, half moaned, half sung:

"Oh, Oi wish Oi had ten thousan' millyun dhollars.

An' a gold-headed cane an' a green neck—tie——"

"Terry Donnahue!" gasped McCunne. "Mon, mon—wha' ails ye?"

The prone figure abruptly stiffened, lay motionless, then gathered itself from fore-and-aft like an uncanny measuring worm, and from that posture, a terrible face looked up into the old Scotchman's. White-ringed eyes flamed out of a sandy beard that partly covered yellowed skin like old parchment barely clothing the stark cheek bones.

Jed Lorry instinctively shrank back when the derelict turned a baleful glance upon him. It seemed almost inhuman that such an ember of flesh could still burn with life.

Still on all fours, the recluse looked up again at McCunne, and there appeared in his smoldering gaze a flicker of interest, then a steady look of recognition.

The Scot turned back to the lead mule and unhooked a water bag. Unsteadily the other raised a refusing hand.

"Nary food nor dhrink kin ye give me," he cackled.

His eyes dilated insanely. He struggled to his feet and balanced himself totteringly.

"Aye! Oi've sold me soul tay th' divvil!" he shrieked, clutching at the brim of his hat as though to steady himself. "Aye, for gold. 'Twas gold, gold! A chunk ave it, like th' splash ave uh tear dhrop—th' divvil's tear. Oi tell ye. An' it weighed like a sack ave grain."

Beating his emaciated chest, his speech became an inarticulated gibberish, out of which struggled a few distinguishable sentences.

"By th' green water hole in th' Deer Horn Cañon. 'Twas an hunder' poun's, an' more, it weighed—an' Oi dragged th' dead mule over it, sir'r—an' left it in th' sand. 'Twas th' sthrong mon, I was thinn, sir'r—— An hunder' thousan' dhollars—an' a—an' a green—— No! Oi've sold me soul tay th' divvil. Oi've fasthed fhorty days an' fhorty nights——

"Don't ye shove nary food nor'r liquor tay me!" he screamed, as McCunne tried to force the water bag to his lips. "Oi've dhrunk from th' dhesert—an' 'twas—fire!"

He toppled, crumpled forward. McCunne caught him and eased him down. "Fetch a canvas, lad, an' a coople ave stakes fra' th' pack," ordered the Scot. "We'll shelter the man fra' th' sun, an' gin' him a peaceful dyin'. 'E'll be finished wi' it now, before verra lang."

"A hundred pounds of gold!" The words blurred in Lorry's brain, as he tore off a pack to get at the canvas. "A nugget like the splash of a teardrop." To leave that buried under the carcass of a mule would madden a man more sane than a desert rat, reflected Lorry.

As he brought the canvas and constructed a partial shelter, the sun-stricken old-timer was growing more rational owing to McCunne's ministrations. These two old waifs had been brought together at the last moment, one doddering, the other dying. The crucible of the desert had fused their differences of birth and creed, and had welded them together in that hapless brotherhood whose eyes behold unnamed visions on the horizon "just over there."

"D'ye promise me," rasped Donnahue, "thot ye'll gi' me dacent burial in Emigrant—an' ye'll 'ave Father Shaughnessy come——"

"Nay!" interposed the rigorous Scot. "Nary's th' accursed priest will I be beholden't to."

Donnahue coughed violently, struggling to rise. "Am Oi leavin' ye th' gold for nothin'?" he cried chokingly.

"Nay, money canna be used ta shame my soul," protested the sturdy Presbyterian.

Donnahue gathered himself for a last appeal.

"D'ye mind, mon?" he hoarsely whispered at last. "Many's th' nip ave good

liquor we've took wit ach ither in th' good days? D'ye mind one mornin' in Panamint whin we came out ave it tagither in th' calaboos? Would ye ferget yer croonie for a bit ave scruple, Dan?" he pleaded. "Ye ould heretic, mon—'ave th' praste," he croaked. "An' I wan' a green tree o'er me grave, mon, tay shade it. Noone ave yer stinkin' pally verdes, but uh—uh bay tree—yis, uh—green bay tree—— Yer word—ould—sinner, Dan—yer word——"

The flaming eyes sought those of Singing Solomon with their final flicker of reason. "Uh—green bay—tree, wit' th' shade ave it—in th' afthernoon—— Promise me—Dan——"

"Yea, yea, mon—I promise ye," capitulated the old sage. "Ye'll ha' two trees, Terry, mon—two trees an' Father Shaughnessy!"

The life forces reluctantly withdrew from the gaunt frame, leaving a reflection of contentment on the face which McCunne, with an unwonted smarting in his faded eyes, let gently slip back onto the crystalline earth.

"Starved for a wee morsel av food," muttered the Scot, bitterly, rising stiffly to his feet. "Let us double th' packs onta one av th' beasties, Lorry. Best we carry him on my Jenny. 'Tis eighteen miles, but there nothin' left ta th' heft av him."

For a moment the younger man made no move to comply. "Where's Deer Horn Cañon?" he demanded abruptly.

Turning from his task, McCunne eyed him blinkingly.

" 'Tis easy ta find," said he. "Did ye na' see, as we coom this way fra Chookwalla Springs, where a cañon forks oot inta th' desert leavin' ridges like th' points av a deer horn? 'Tis a cañon av five mooths."

"Yeh, I seen it," grunted Lorry. "D'yuh mean we ain't goin' back there now?"

"Mon!" expostulated the withered sage, simulating a surprise which suggested that it was a question he had been waiting to hear. "Would ye 'ave me breakin' a solemn promise ta th' dead? Ken ye that th' gold isna' mine til th' contract be fu'filled as made? Let not yersel' be tempted av th' devil, lad. 'Twas himself, as was poor Terrence, yon, wha' sold his own soul—— Didna' ye hear him sayin'?"

Suddenly the other's neck cords tautened and his face darkened hotly. He burst out at the top of his voice.

"Yes! I heard him sayin'! An' I'm done listenin'! I don't wan'a hear no more, now ner never!"

With an abruptness equal to the speech, he checked himself and fell silently to assisting in the doubling up of the packs. In his resentful mood, he made a mental note that McCunne had spoken of the big nugget without using the plural pronoun.

Casting curious glances at him, his hobbling old partner was likewise silent for a space. And then he spoke apparently apropos of nothing:

" 'Tis twenty mile fra water, for mon nor beast, oonless ye——"

As though his mind had been following the same channel, Lorry interrupted, "Wasn't he sayin' they was a green water hole? Is it poison?"

McCunne eyed him strangely. "It isna' pizen," he replied.

"Well, couldn't a mon drink it?"

"Yea, a mon could drink it," again responded the old rat.

"Well, what's wrong with it, then?" snapped the other.

" 'Tis nothin' sa verra bod, as I ken of," committed the sage, and he clamped his thin lips with finality.

After adjusting their canvas-wrapped burden on the lead mule, McCunne clutched the halter rope and again started on the journey. He turned and found himself looking into the cannon-like bore of a 48-90. The man holding the huge, antiquated rifle was suddenly grown determined, tense, motionless.

"Keep a movin', yuh ole croaker," coolly commanded Lorry. "Here's where you an' me part. I staked all my cash on this outfit, an' if it don't belong to me, I'm guessin' it soon will. Yer all right, McCunne, only I'm sick of yuh, that's all. Move on!"

The old rat turned about, a look of glee in his face, a suggestion of triumph. "Go thy way in sin!" he yelped.

As a parting missile, he shouted back over his shoulder.

"Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein; an' whoso rolleth a stone, it will return upon him." The words ended in a dry laugh which hung lifeless in the lethal air. He had eighteen miles to travel through the poisonous heat, and the water had been transferred to Lorry's mule, but the laugh was incarnate with fanatic joy.

It chilled the hearer. He watched the old man resume his painful march without another backward look. Almost disgustedly he got his own fretting beast turned about and headed along the back trail.

From liquid white to a glowing disk, redder than blood, the sun sank, throwing a long wavering shadow in the rear of the slow trudging man and burdened beast. The red glow died out, and one by one the stars struck down through the thickening night, spreading a nebulous sheen over the sand. The two creeping shadows within the dark progressed unhaltingly, covering imperceptible distances only after hours.

Lorry dared not risk another day of traveling under the killing sun. He must treasure his water supply for the burden bearer that was to pack the treasure. A nugget that weighed like a sack of grain! Perhaps a hundred and twenty pounds! What had been the matter with the cracked old fool, McCunne, anyway; and with the water hole in Deer Horn Cañon? If water was there, he would likely find quail and rabbits, to replenish his provisions. He was a rifle shot. He could neatly take off a quail's head at fifty yards. But just now he could not think of food. A man's body revolts at food after passing a certain point of desert fatigue.

Night paled in the east. Now he was skirting the ragged, wind-worn hills. He moved numbly; the wearied little beast dragged at the rope and stumbled when its sharp hoofs sank down. Ahead of him was the longest point of the Deer Horn, running out into the basin floor. Inverted fan-wise, the dark zigzag cañons sloped back into the hills to a common meeting point. The thought trickled into Lorry's numbed brain that Donnahue's buried nugget might not be in the main cañon. And yet, it was by the green water hole. That would be in the main cañon, farther up. McCunne had tried to mislead him, at first, had he! Tried to make him believe there wasn't any water! The old idiot! He had caught him up by Donnahue's own words. "By th' green water hole in Deer Horn Cañon." Undoubtedly McCunne would come, after fulfilling the rites for Donnahue. "An eye for an eye" was the sage's unwavering belief, which he followed fanatically, even turning its judgments against himself. He wondered what McCunne could do, when he should come? The old Scotchman was opposed to the use of weapons, although he did carry an old 44-Colt's.

Lorry turned into the level floor of the cañon. There were no boulders. After trudging nearly a mile, he staked the mule where it could feed scantily on withered bunch grass, and gave it a little water. Taking the small canteen for himself, he continued on. He could not rest. The dull throbbing in his legs had ceased. There was no feeling in them. His brain had become alert again. He would find the green hole, find the great nugget, return for the mule, carry the treasure to another place and hide it, anywhere, in another cañon. He would

provision himself, then, and rest, and go out at his leisure by way of the Chookwalla. Could McCunne travel any faster than he could? Hardly!

The cañon floor was dry as the desert beyond; but the sand was loose and deep. It had piled into eddies in crevices of the walls. He passed one, and then another, of the old channel courses. He wished he'd brought the mule—— It would be some distance yet. Long-dried water had spread a good deal, had wormed about. The floor of the cañon was nearly a quarter of a mile wide. It was nothing but sand, deep, billowed sand, white, clean, fine. The sun was at high noon.

He climbed a little way up a crumbling point which formed the intersection where another dry channel branched off. A few scrubby greasewoods grew out of the wind-carved sandstone. He could see quite a distance down the branch cañon, and a little way up the main one. Nothing but sand, dry, burning. Heat waves writhed up from it. He drank again and went on.

He was not tired. He felt an odd new energy creeping into his veins. His head was clear as lightning. Lightning! That was it—he was lightning. He could tear on forever. Up and down, up and down, he was sailing over the sand billows—so easy—yes, like sailing—well, he was a boat. The water splashed, dry water, sucked and gurgled at his feet. There was a mast, coming—— A boat? No, a snarly juniper tree—strange!

High ground there. A little island in the cañon floor. Beyond that—sure, that's where it would be! Beyond that—the green hole. He exulted breathlessly. How strong he was! Light, weightless! Why couldn't he reach that juniper? It was just ahead. He was moving swiftly, like the wind. Why couldn't he get any nearer to that tree? Funny. What a fool! It was moving on, before him. He must move faster to catch up with it. What was that he was saying? He must catch himself—hear what he was talking about. It took a clear head to do that. He was saying it again. Ha, ha! He'd catch himself this time. "Damn it—I'm jest a standin' here, I ain't movin' a'tall." What? Was that his voice? Of course. He was standing still.

He shook himself. His heart beat rapidly. He was approaching the juniper, now, very slowly.

The bark of the tree was spongy and rough. He clung to it. The cañon was wide and dotted with greasewood—a valley, a little desert. There was no green hole, no water hole, nothing. Only the age-old dryness which proclaimed drought far-reaching, long-enduring.

The sun was slanting downward into the crotch of the cañon, reddening the smoky horizon. There were men wearing mushroom hats, marching through the red haze on the crests of the walls. Lorry crouched against the tree. Searching men, gold seekers—an army! No! Stones. Leering, table-hatted stones. He braced himself rigidly. The stones did not move.

How suddenly it had darkened! He seemed to have rooted in the earth. His brain must be a little foggy, he thought. Now the air was growing cooler. He must go back to his outfit. He realized now that it would be a long way up the cañon to any kind of a water hole. He must reach a higher point where bedrock would be nearer the surface. He would bring the mule this time. What if he shouldn't find it? Now there wouldn't be enough water left to reach the Chookwalla, anyway. For a hundred steps, movement was agony. He was cool-headed, now, dreadfully cool. He knew that the heat had nearly got him. Again the stars were out.

Finally a sort of a muggy daze settled down over him that he couldn't shake off. He seemed to reside somewhere in it, a clear thinking being, and he drove

his physical mechanism on. It lasted him through the night and into the high heat of the following day. He forgot time. He was back again, creeping past the juniper tree, out into the little bush-dotted desert beyond. Why did that crazy mule drag so? He must go on. There was no time, nothing, only going on.

There didn't seem to be any more cañon. The walls seemed to fall away. Where was the cañon he sought? And Donnahue's gold? Confound that mule!

It was a long, long way. The daze thickened about him like black fog, split with bursting flashes of light. He frenziedly dragged ahead, and unhooked the deflated water bag from the pack. The water helped him a little. Again he could see more clearly. God! Where was the cañon? There was no cañon!

He was back on the Armagoza Trail, headed toward the Chookwalla. He looked behind him. There was the longest Deer Horn point running out into the desert, back three miles at least. That mule! The brute had turned him around and was heading for the water he knew of. Twenty miles! He could not walk twenty miles more. He unhooked his rifle from the pack and slung it over his shoulder by the strap. Then he let the rope drop. The plodding mule went on ahead, dragging the rope. Maybe he would get there.

Now he must stop. He must rest. He must think. Again the sun was reddening, sinking. He dragged himself a little distance up the nearest cañon mouth and crawled onto a table stone.

He dreamed that the day had come again, that he had seen McCunne!

In a wild frenzy he awoke. His mind was clearing; he could feel the blood pumping up through the arteries of the neck. At that moment he was conscious of what the desert was doing to him; but he got to his knees and scanned the level stretches about him and farther on.

He saw McCunne. The old rat was leading a burro this time, hobbling on his wooden peg, on up the cañon. How could he stop him? He was out of good rifle range. Besides, he did not want actually to kill the old idiot.

The answer came to him. About the roots of the mesquite bush were checked cracks in the sun baked earth. He selected a check about a foot in diameter and pried it out with his fingers. Pulling off his stiff canvas overshirt, he knotted the sleeves and neck. He slipped the big clod into it, and getting to his feet, he swung the sack thus made to his back. McCunne would think that he was carrying the nugget.

And McCunne was looking about, as though in search of something. His eyes were turned to the ground. Now he lifted his head. The old rat saw Lorry at last. He threw up his hand and started to come back.

It was working out fine, chuckled Lorry. Now he would go out into the desert. McCunne would follow; for McCunne would think that he was carrying the nugget. Thus he would decoy McCunne away from the green hole. And McCunne would never get back.

The rat was creeping up on him. Why couldn't he get ahead faster? If he wobbled on his feet, McCunne would only think it due to the weight of the gold. Finally he fell down awkwardly and lay so that he could watch his hobbling follower. The old rat approached sturdily. The pause gave him another very clear moment. Now was his time. Very steadily he sighted the heavy rifle and held a bead on his wavering target until he could catch it just where he wanted it. The sage only hastened his approach, holding up his hand. How steady he felt! He pulled the trigger.

After the report, he saw that his calculation had been correct. The little burro crumpled into a heap and was still. The old Scot was shaking a raging

fist. Lorry couldn't make out what he was saying.

He laughed. He got to his feet and trudged on. The old man would not be expecting him to travel far with that weight of gold. Ha, ha! Glancing back, he saw that McCunne had not even removed his big water bag from the fallen animal. That would leave him plenty of water when he should himself get back to the dead burro. Yes, old Singing Solomon was trailing him again, and shouting again—shouting parables, he guessed. Ha, ha!

Was McCunne expecting to shoot him or drive him mad with the proverbs? Of course, he had been going for days without eating. Or, had he? He felt strong. But the weight of the gold? It was heavy, a hundred pounds! How long could he carry that? Was he crazy? He must remember, he was carrying just a clod of earth. What was he to remember? Why, only a clod—— Oh, but McCunne was not to overtake him—was not to wear him down. He must lead McCunne out into the desert, and then come back, but the other would never get back——

He could hear the old rat shouting again—shouting proverbs! He could keep ahead of a one-legged man.

Several times he fell to his knees. But he vaguely perceived that he was holding his own end of the race. He was even outdistancing McCunne a little. Had there been another lapse in his mind? The outlines of the Deer Horn seemed a great distance behind. About him he saw the blinding earth, unbroken by stick nor stone.

Now, before the heat devils commenced again, he must accomplish the final act. The relentless old rat was coming on, silently, doggedly. Yes, plainly the pursuer's intention was to wear him out. He twisted the rifle around until he could unsling it from his back without dropping his other burden. Then he stopped and turned.

"Hol't ye, mon——" came the faint, high quaver of the old Scot, "ye dinna——"

The words were shattered by the terrific explosion of the big gun. The old desert rat spun half-way around, threw up his hands and sprawled grotesquely, his old linen duster flopping.

Resting on the long barrel, Lorry watched him, and after an instant, his throat crackled painfully—he was laughing. McCunne was trying to get to his feet, to his one foot. He succeeded. He was holding a piece of stick in his hand. He began waving it and shouting. It was his shattered wooden peg. Again Lorry laughed.

Now he must get back to McCunne's outfit. There was water and food. Afterward he could take his time. That's all he had to do, just to get back there. He saw the old rat take a drink from his canteen. He could get back to the dead burro for his drink, but McCunne could never get back, hopping on one leg.

Now he would make a wide detour around McCunne—he didn't want to hear those everlasting proverbs. McCunne was beginning to hop.

Why couldn't he get back around him? He was always there, just so far behind, hopping. Very well, he would lead him farther out. McCunne was just hopping to his own death. Why did he keep it up?

The gold, the heavy nugget, was tearing him down. Why need he carry it now? McCunne could never carry it out—hopping, hopping! There he was, still following him, seeking an "eye for an eye," shouting proverbs—"The wicked flee—the wicked flee—when—when——" What was that? Yes, "no man pursueth——" That was right.

"Who rolleth a stone—who rolleth a stone—— He walketh uprightly——" No, that wasn't right. What was the old fool shouting? Or was he hearing it? He was saying it himself. Why

couldn't he outrun a hopping man—a hopping, hopping——

"The end thereof are the ways of death——" Yes, what was the end thereof? The hopping death. If only he didn't have to carry the gold, he could escape. Wasn't he running? McCunne was hopping, to death—in order to drive him to his. On he came—the hopping, hopping death. Now, why must he hop, hop, through the dark?

He felt a trickle of water on his lips. He was emerging again from the muggy void. He was looking up into the pale, red-rimmed eyes, the grizzled, tired face of old Daniel McCunne. There was no wrath in the face, only a wearied, determined and pitying look. He must yell at that face, scare it away. It would choke him——

"Take yer gold, take yer gold! Yuh hoppin' ole——"

"Tut, tut, lad," came the response. "Dinna ye shout so at yer auld partner. I dinna want th' gold, lad. 'Tis not that as I've been a tryin' ta reach ye for. Steady, noo, lad, take joost a little water in yer mouth. Sa weel, noo—buck up—auld Dan wouldna' harm ye. An' here is somthin'—a wee sip av it. Sa weel, noo. 'Tis good licker, if 'twas always used so."

Slowly the confusion in Jed Lorry's brain abated. Dizzily he sat up and looked at McCunne.

"What is it ye 'ave in yer shirt, lad?" questioned the latter.

"Th' gold——" began Lorry, then he grew giddy and sick. "A clod," he said.

The old sage smiled understandingly. "I kenned ye wouldna' find gold," he wheezed wearily. "Forty years I've known th' mon Donnahue. 'Tis forty years since he found th' noogget he was speakin' of. An' he spent it in riotous livin'. When he was bringin' it oot, his mule died an' he buried it by th' slime pool. Always, after that, when he was heavy in his coops, he didna' remember 'avin' gane back ta fetch it. Many's th' time I've hear'n him——

"'Twas my fault, lad, knowin' th' folly av it, that I let th' weakness beset ye an' th' temptation win ye. I've come beggin' yer fergi'ness for my sin. An' I dinna tell ye that th' Deer Horn's had nay water since th' rains av nineteen-six. Nay hole there has filled since thin——" The old rat's energy seemed to be leaving him at last.

Lorry's mind was fully alive now.

"And yuh let me go back, come back here?" he demanded hoarsely, "knowin' that?" Then he hesitated, while the old Scot weakly, shamefacedly, nodded his admission of the duplicity. "And yuh done dead right, too!" he added.

"Nay, nay mon, I didna' do right," the sage of Panamint contradicted with a vehement gasp, "'twas my sin! Take ye this canteen—— Take anly a mickle drap fra th' flask, an' 'twill pull ye through——"

"Yuh been uh followin' me all this here time, jest t' tell me that?" rasped Lorry.

"I want yer fergi'ness, lad. I'm an auld mon, noo, I would be passin' on wi' a clean slate."

Lorry slipped the canteen over his shoulder and the flask into his pocket. He wobbled to his feet.

"Passin' on, nothing!" he growled.

He had new reason to live, to dig down into his vitals for the last spark of force that would respond. It was a sudden burst of affection for the crazy old rat who had followed him to death's door to beg forgiveness of the mean, contemptible coward that he had been. Reaching down and getting an arm about the old man's middle, he lifted him up lightly, easily. From some hidden source he was demanding that everlasting endurance which comes to strong men in a time of need.

"Steady, now, ole pard," he encouraged. "We'll get back t'gether, er we don't get there a'tall!"

HOW'S a feller goin' to tell if he is pleasin' folks if they don't git up and say suthin'. Well, some have, and to each and every one who spoke his little piece and made his remarks, kind or unkind, we up and give thanks.

Here are some of the letters we have received. Just stir up that fire a little, Pete, me boy—what, the chuck wagon lanthorn—cook's through with it? Fine! Thankee, son!

Now, here we go. This is from L. R. P., of Edwards, Kentucky:

"DEAR BOSS OF THE ROUND-UP: Have been thinking some time of giving you my honest opinion of your wonderful W. S. M. I have read it regularly for the past three years and I find it to be one of the best all-round magazines printed.

"George Owen Baxter's 'Bandit of the Black Hills' is going fine, also Emerson Hough I must say was some writer. Do not think much of Hankins' 'Wagon Boss'—too tedious. But above them all in my estimation is F. R. Buckley. If it is not asking too much would like to know where I may obtain some of his work in book form. Must also commend the cover design for the issue of April 21st. 'Hired Guns' finished almost too abrupt, but must say Max Brand is among the best when it comes to holding up the interest. Let's have another by Johnston McCulley."

That's what we want, "honest opinion." We'll get after Max about that sudden ending. Other folks has said as how he pulls up on his hanches too quicklike. Bought a good one from McCulley only last week. He's out in California now; been away from Colorado for 'most a year.

Another from the same State as is noted for its fine horseflesh and fair women:

"March 17, 1923.

"DEAR EDITOR: We haven't missed a copy of the W. S. M. in a long, long time, but there are some things we have missed. They are Flapjack Meehan and Tubby Willows. I wish Mr. Author would hurry and write some more. We enjoy them so much. 'Hired Guns' and 'Wild Freedom' were wonderful.

"MR. AND MRS. GLENN MUNDY."

Just steppin' north a bit—about as far as we can go, and still stay to home—to the State where they all grow big

and sturdy, 'cause, some folks say, the rough climate kills the weak ones off young, and in order to stand it, one has got to be *there*, and right from the start. Well:

"My Dear Editor: For my family of fifteen, I have for years had all of the best periodicals, eighteen at present, and none more appreciated than Western, of which I have complete files.

"I feel deeply interested to know if there is to be a sequel to 'Wild Freedom,' by Baxter, concluded in December 16th issue, and a certain anxiety will be allayed and a high appreciation and anticipation of future pleasure will be mine if you can answer 'Yes.'

"M. C. Plummer.

"Portland, Maine."

George, you sure will have to get goin' and do some more about the folks in "Wild Freedom." It certainly is a compliment, George, when you get 'em so interested they want more off of the same piece.

Now for a big jump, all the way to Nebraska:

"To the Boss of The Round-up: Have just finished the story 'Hired Guns,' by Max Brand. Will you please tell Mr. Brand, if he wishes to keep me for a friend, will he please write another part to 'Hired Guns,' as he did not finish up all the business he started. I am a great admirer of the Western Story Magazine. L. B.

"Grass, Nebr."

Well, another feller has got to do another one about some people he has made so all-fired popular that there will be a strike if he doesn't get busy along the same lines. But haow about the one that begins in this issue, "Galloping Danger?" Not the same people, but, say, we found this one a mighty interesting yarn. Kinda got us, this one did. And, while we're on the subject, how about "The Starlit Trail," by that extremely popular lad, Joseph B. Ames?

What? Just as we get good and well started? It's those blame compositors, sayin' as how we have more than exhausted our allotted space. But it's no use. Their word is law. So, 'by till next week, and a lot of you come, same place and time!

A FAMOUS SCOUT

ONE of the famous old-time scouts of the plains is still alive, "Uncle Joe" Walling, who was born in Frederick, Maryland, in 1844. In his youth he heard the call of the Indian country, and before the Civil War he was guarding wagon trains that wended their way over the Western plains. In this occupation he took part in many deadly battles with the Indians, and he was the rear guard with the first wagon trains that went into the Indian Territory from Kansas.

At the outbreak of the Civil War he enlisted in a Confederate cavalry battalion and later was transferred and fought at Gettysburg under General Robert E. Lee. He still carries marks of the wounds received in that encounter. During the Spanish-American War he enlisted in the United States navy and served on the battleship *Iowa*. Later he crossed the ocean with Pawnee Bill's Wild West show, having charge of the Indians. In 1914 Uncle Joe rode a horse from Baltimore, Maryland, to San Francisco, California, and back, completing the long, arduous trip in eight months. After countless stunts which were both daring and dangerous, he is still active at the age of eighty.

Miss Louise Rice, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you. It must be understood that Miss Rice will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

WHEN The Tree received the letter that is printed below, it quivered all through its boughs and leaves, quivered with sympathy, and tiny little drops came out all over it. And The Tree whispered through all its branches, "I know the Gangsters will feel just the same way." Now read it, and see if you don't.

DEAR MISS RICE: I don't suppose you object to an old woman being a member of The Gang, do you? I have been wearing the little blue pin for over a year, now, greatly to the mystification of many in this small village.

I notice that there seem to be a good many lonely boys these days, who have lost their folks or who have drifted away from them. Well, here is a lonely old woman. Doesn't it strike you that there might be an advantage in two lonely people like this getting together?

I have an annuity which gives me a very comfortable living and a roomy, old-fashioned house with about four acres of land where I have my vegetables grown and keep hens and a cow. I have an old dog, and I am dreading that he will go soon. That will leave me all alone except for the man who does the outside work; does it very badly, too, as I often cannot get out of the house for weeks. I am not bedridden, but have times when I have to be very careful about getting chilled.

I lost my only son years ago and have no near relations left. I wonder, my dear Miss Rice, if, in all that big Gang that you and The Owl watch over, you could find me a son? I would like a boy with a fair education, not over thirty, who would like to take hold of the outside work here and live with me. There is plenty of ground near that I could get for him to use if he wanted to raise something so as to be making money for the future. I would have nothing to leave him but this piece of property, as my income goes when I do, but until I die there would be plenty for us both, and I would buy his clothes and give him spending money. If he did as I suggest, started to raising something, he could have a nice business by the time he would need it, for there is a large city not ten miles away by the railroad, though fourteen from here.

A boy such as would want to do this would not be in a position, perhaps, to give me any references, but after I have written to him a few times, I would know, I think, what he was like. I will take a boy, no matter how poor he is, but would want him to be able to read to me and to discuss intelligently the news of the day; in short, to be a real companion to an old woman who has read omnivorously all of her life. If he has no money I will pay the transportation.

Please use the pen name which I give you. I understand fully that I may be pull-

ing an avalanche of young men down on my old head, but if I find one among them all who can be to me what my dear boy would have been I shall be satisfied.

I feel that I am asking a good deal of you, in asking you, dear sister Louise, to forward this mail for me, but I am old and my eyes are not what they once were, and I positively want it understood that I will answer only such letters as appeal to me. It seems the better way to have you do this, as you are so kind to do, as I have noticed in other cases. I inclose postage for forwarding, and will be glad to be informed of any expense that this puts you to.

Please remember, dear boys, in writing me, that it is not a rich woman who makes this offer of a home. I shall expect you to take a hand in the care of the place as you would if you were the son that is lost, and there is no inheritance except this house. But there is a peaceful, quiet living while I live.

There is good boating, bathing, and fishing on the river that runs along the back part of the property, and I believe that rabbits and quail can be had in the hills, about four miles from here.

That is all that I can think of to tell. I hope, dear son, that somewhere in the world you will soon be reading this, and soon come to cheer a lonely old heart. TENNESSEE.

That's a very serious offer, and The Tree has taken time to make inquiries before it was published. Please write very frankly and fully in your replies. If you have any references it would be gracious to send copies of them. Do *not* send any original documents.

DEAR MISS RICE: I have noticed of late that a good many of The Gang are interested in poultry. Well, I am another poultry fan. I am, I believe, considered quite an authority on the subject, and I would be glad to correspond with any who are either in the business now or are thinking of going into it. I would also be glad to hear from any one who has a small business of a similar nature. This is not for business deals, but just for friendship and to exchange views and opinions and information.

WESLEY CHAPPELL.
2608 Madison Street, Baker, Ore.

DEAR MISS RICE: I have been reading the W. S. M. for a long time now, and enjoy every bit of it, but some of the letters that the boys and girls write in to The Tree amuse me. They seem to think that all of the West is wild and woolly and runnin' over with Indians and cowboys. Of course, there are parts of the West that are still as the story writers make it out to be, but there are many parts that are full of city schools and paved streets and automobiles. Oregon has about seven million dollars' worth of paved highways alone. Of course, there is wild game in the West, but most of us hunt deer, elk, and bear in a Ford! But a Ford is not to be despised. Of course, we get out and leave it on the road, but it is the finest thing in the world to get to the jumping-off place.

Some people talk as if there wasn't any out of doors anywhere except out West. You can always find the out of doors if you are willing to go out of the cities. Of course, the West has thousands of acres that never have been filed on and where nobody has ever lived. Lots of country hardly even mapped. That is one of the great attractions of the West, but I can take you up in the hills of New York State and show you country that no man knows much about. An old man told us kids once, that better apples always grew in the other fellow's orchard. Ain't it the truth!

The West has to have real men and women; all new lands do. For the real man and woman who is not afraid of hardships and who is willing to forgo the pleasures that come from the more congested parts of the country, there are homes and even fortunes to be made here. One of The Gang. C. H. MCCULLEN.
Rainier, Ore.

Another pardner, now. My, this Old Holla is just about bustin' this week.

DEAR MISS RICE: Will you please drop this notice in the Holla? "Wanted, a darn good hiker, about eighteen years old, to hike to California this summer, three months going, same returning. Must be white. All you need is thirty berries. If we fall short, plenty of wood needs chopping and windows washing along our route. If you don't go, you're crazy. See Jim Whitfield, 440 West 124th Street, New York City."

There's no catch in this, Miss Rice. It says it all. JIM.

Some of the folks get a surprise when the mail man gets to stopping at their door, after they've had a letter in The Tree. F'r instance——

MY DEAR MISS RICE: About a year ago you published a little letter that I wrote

The Tree. Can you imagine my surprise when it brought me over five hundred letters from all parts of the United States and Canada? Well, it was wonderful. Now I have another request. I wonder if you can find me a partner and chum. I have a four-room bungalow, and I want a partner who will go in with me raising pure-bred poultry. There is a big resort right near here, and I have satisfied myself that it would be a success. I am twenty-one, and here is my picture.

RALPH G. SHOCKLEY.
Route 4, Box 180½, Waynesboro, Pa.

Ralph is a husky boy who seems to be wearing one of the most good-natured grins we ever saw in our lives. We'll say that chickens reared by that smile ought to be topnotchers.

DEAR MISS RICE: Well, here I come again, but not as the lonesome little girl I was when I first wrote you, for when a person has about two hundred correspondents, they can't be lonely, can they? I ought not to say that I have that many, however, for I simply could not take them all. I wish, Miss Rice, that you would say for me that I thank them, one and all for their kindness, and that in the course of time I will try to get around to at least a personal word of thanks to them.

Wishing you and The Tree just heaps of success,

Sincerely,
DORIS HUNT.

Lawton, N. Y.

DEAR MISS RICE: It is late for me to thank you for putting my letter in the old Holla, but, you see, I busted my leg, and here I am in the hospital. I had to leave the address that I gave and lost some letters, but made one of the finest friends in the world through The Tree. I shall have to be here a good while, I am afraid, and would like to hear from some more of the folks. JAMES R. CLARK.

Letterman General Hospital, San Francisco, Calif.

DEAR LADY O' THE TREE: For a long time I have kept a sharp lookout for all the letters that came into the Old Holla, and gradually I have come to feel that here was a way out of my dilemma. Here are the facts that cause me to write to you to-night.

I am a girl of nineteen, and from the early age of thirteen I have had responsibilities to carry that would have proven rather heavy for even more experienced shoulders than mine. Now, after five years of struggle, I find that I am getting up the ladder, that I have an assured position, bright prospects, and most of life's comforts, but—I have few friends, and those are not of the caliber that I want. My mind has been so full of what I had to do that I had no time for unimportant people and no courage to fight for the friendship of those for whom I could have really cared. I have what are supposed to be friends, business acquaintances, and some people who, perhaps, rather admire me for the fight I have put up, but these are not what one would "grapple to the soul, with hooks of steel." Another thing, I have been so busy that I have given the impression to a good many people that I am too self-sufficient to really need friends.

May I find the friends for which I crave through you, dear Tree? I have no great desire for the pleasures that most girls want. I have not been able to indulge in social life, you see, for so long that now I do not feel that I have to have it, but to live without congenial friends—no, that I cannot do any longer. I am very fond of reading, and of the out of doors, and I like to discuss anything that any intelligent person would.

Anxiously hoping that I shall find among The Gangsters those dear friends of whom I dream, I am, yours sincerely,

SEEKER OF FRIENDS.

This is a very intelligent young Gangster, folks, and we hope that she will find what she seeks. Address her through The Tree.

Right in the same mail with Brother Cram's letter about the literary circle of The Hollow Tree that he and Brother Czabag are forming, comes a breezy note from Brother Czabag, also.

DEAR MISS RICE: I have been reading the WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, and am intensely interested in the letters in The Hollow Tree. I would certainly appreciate hearing from other Gangsters, men of my own age and with wide interests.

I will introduce myself. Am twenty-seven. Came to Alaska in 1920, am at present with the Alaskan Engineering Commission, and intend to remain for some time. All last summer I was eating moose, caribou, and grouse. Then the winter came, the long winter that lay all over the North, from the Yukon to the flats of Tanana Valley; and

then the Northern lights began to flash. I see that they are often described as white, but usually they are green, yellow, and red. Dawn is just a little fading of the darkness. Once in long weeks the winter sun peeps out. It is a time that will prove the mettle of any one.

But now spring is with us, and it seems that the whole world is a festival. I know, though, that soon the winter will come again, and I want to be sure that I have many friends, this next time, to make the long night pleasant and merry. I shall hope to hear from some of The Gang, surely. Sincerely yours. WILLIAM JORDAN CZABAG.
Nenana, Alaska.

DEAR GANGSTERS: I am what they call in the parlance of a certain stratum of society a "dick," and so I do a great deal of traveling, having work that makes me go sniffing up and down the country on the trail of this and that one who has been so unwise as to run counter to the law. I have been clear up to the arctic circle and all through the Yukon Territory and down to Mexico—yes, and lost track of my man at that. In fiction the dicks seldom seem to do that, but we of the actual fact sometimes do.

I would like to hear from anybody at all, as I have few friends, and there are times when I feel lonely and blue, although there is no real reason for it. It is just that I have no family, and that I seem not to have found fellows who are interested in what I am. I like good literature and am fond of sea stories and stories of the out of doors. I think that Mr. Howard, of this magazine, writes some of the best outdoor stuff I ever read. Like to fish when I have time, and have seen almost every play worth while for the last fifteen years. I would like some friends who would care to discuss these things. JONATHAN MERCER.

We have Brother Mercer's address and will forward his mail. Please, brother, be very sure to send us any change in it, as per your promise.

DEAR MISS RICE: Please allow me to say that the letter you read out for me to the folks that gather around The Hollow Tree certainly brought results. I was expecting only a few replies from persons interested in cryptography, but instead I was swamped with letters from all over the United States, Mexico, and Canada. I have answered all except a few whose handwriting was so eccentric that, with all my training in reading cryptograms, I failed to decipher them. Please accept my thanks for the service that the old H. T. has rendered, which I do assure you I appreciate. B. E. BRIGMAN.
Box 15, Roanoke Rapids, No. Caro.

Florence M. Andrews, of Bingham, Maine, is a friendly girl who wants friends. James Conquy, of No. 4 Cedar Street, Newton, New Jersey, is twenty and would like to hear from any of the brothers of about his age. Hi C. Bigler, of No. 242 Albemarle Street, Rochester, New York, has been on a ranch for a year and now wants to go into the horse business for himself. He is looking for a good, practical man, one who is square and truthful, to help him. E. F. Shute, Box 41, Concordia, Kansas, is an old-timer who is going West, partly on business and partly on pleasure, and will take along even a tenderfoot pal if that man measures up to the standard. Please write fully in addressing Brother Shute.

Martha Gyrske, Box 52, Campen Avenue, Port Huron, Michigan, is a lonesome girl. Earl Hopkins, of No. 1010 Bennett Avenue, Glenwood Springs, Colorado, is collecting the covers of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE. Wants to hear from "any of the fellows." Erma Heckler lives a long way from town and has only her pets for company. Sisters, please write her; address her at Thaxton, Virginia. "Jack R. T." works in a cotton mill and wants to hear from any of the brothers. Helen L. Kathe, of No. 231 Pierre Avenue, Garfield, New Jersey, would like to hear from any of the sisters. "Laura" would like to hear from women anywhere who are making their living by doing fancywork, with a view to exchanging patterns and ideas.

And now, before we quit, let's say a word about our grand old brother, "Arizona Bill," otherwise Colonel Ray E. Gardner, who celebrated his seventy-eighth birthday not long ago. In a newspaper clipping about this event, we read: "The veteran was a member of

L troop of Reno's command at the time of the Custer battle and was present at Gettysburg when Abraham Lincoln delivered his immortal address on the battlefield. He is a veteran of three wars and innumerable border and Indian engagements, and is the most widely known scout and soldier of the old days now living. He was awarded the congressional medal for bravery. He served in the Spanish-American War and was a member of the expedition to Peking during the Boxer uprising. He is from a family of warriors, and his four sons are in the service, one a commander in the navy, one a lieutenant colonel in the field, one a major in the marine corps, and the fourth in the medical department of the army." Brother Bill, they mentioned the burros, too; said that when you were in Washington, they let 'em graze on the White House lawn. Give our best regards to those good pals of yours!

IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE:

Too Many Guns

When it is a question of guns, call the sheriff—he knows.

By CHARLES W. TYLER

Old Nail Biter

Here is where the old desert rat gets a taste of something besides nails.

By JOHN H. HAMLIN

White Madness

Trust a dog to come up to your expectations in a crisis.

By T. VON ZIEKURSCH

And Other Stories

BE SURE TO ORDER YOUR COPY NOW

Where To Go and How To Get There

By *John North*

It is our aim in this department to be of genuine practical help and service to those who wish to make use of it. Don't hesitate to write to us and give us the opportunity of assisting you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

UMATILLA COUNTY, OREGON

EMERGING from the mountain and forest regions of Wallowa County, Oregon, and proceeding westward in the course of these brief easy-chair pigrimages in search of fortune and adventure in the various counties of that State, we pass from what is known as the Blue Mountain section to the Columbia Basin country, of which Umatilla County forms a part.

We can imagine ourselves treading in the footsteps of the pioneers, for they had the same experience of emerging from this mountain wilderness and viewing the broad, open Columbia River region spread out before them, with the snow-capped peaks of Mount Hood and Mount Adams visible in the distance, and the splendid river winding along its course in the middle foreground.

The view to-day is different from that seen by the first explorers, for now the land is a vast checkerboard of wheat fields in the river country lying near the mountains, and there are abundant evidences of the march of progress and the development of a flourishing agricultural prosperity.

Lovers of the wild, seekers after seclusion and rugged mountaineering will find less to appeal to them here in Umatilla County than in Wallowa County, and yet there is a good deal of mountainous territory in the former, and chances to hunt and fish.

Those who are looking for more highly cultivated lands with advantageous shipping facilities will find this county better suited to their purposes than its eastern neighbor. At Hermiston is the headquarters for the Umatilla reclamation project, embracing something like twenty thousand acres of productive land. The soil is unusually fertile, being mostly a silt or what is called a "dust soil," very deep as a rule, and having capacity to retain moisture in large quantities, besides being easily worked. The Umatilla River, a tribu-

tary of the mighty Columbia, furnishes most of the water for the irrigation in this county, and its resources have also been drawn upon by the United States reclamation service to supply Cold Springs reservoir, an artificial lake a few miles from Hermiston, which has been set aside by the government as a refuge for all sorts of wild birds and waterfowl.

Railroad development gives the shippers of the produce of the county ready access to the markets, and the facilities for water transportation are also exceptionally good. The main line of the O.-W. R. & N. traverses the north-central part of the county from northwest to east, and there are several branch lines connecting different important points.

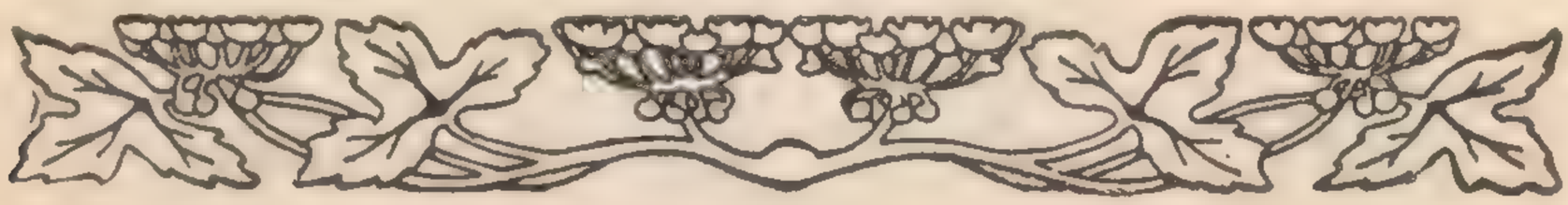
Pendleton, the county seat, is situated on the main line of the O.-W. R. & N. railroad, as is also Hermiston, the reclamation headquarters. Pendleton forms the logical shipping center for the fertile and prosperous wheat and cattle country that stretches away on all sides. I would suggest Pendleton to the visitor of an investigating turn of mind, for he can probably see more and learn more of the surrounding country there and grasp its opportunities better. From this city he can easily reach the great wheat fields and obtain some knowledge of the ins and outs of raising that important staple crop. If he times his visit so as to get there in September, he will see one of the finest wild-West rodeos that is to be witnessed anywhere, at the municipal tract known as Round-up Park. Then, close to the city limits, he will find opportunity to visit a real Indian reservation, where he can acquire arrowheads, medicine stones, and curios from the Indians. A visit to Pendleton will surely prove informative to any one interested in settlement in the country thereabouts.

CLEARING LOGGED-OFF LANDS

DEAR MR. NORTH: I notice in some of your articles you speak of localities where one can get logged-off lands pretty cheap, but it seems to me that you have overlooked the fact that these lands come pretty high to clear. It's a sight more expensive to blast or otherwise remove stumps than to clear off brush, so that perhaps these logged-off lands are not so cheap after all's said and done. What do you know about it? G. F. HOLMES.

Lincoln, Neb.

The question of logged-off lands is open to debate. Some people take your view; others the contrary one. The ingenious man may find a way to clear off his stumps without involving himself in a prohibitive expense. These logged-off lands comprise some of the best agricultural land in the West, once the stumps are removed. The following method is one that has been tried with success lately by men confronted with the problem of clearing their stumps at slight expense: The process consists of building a fire in such a way as to convert the stump into a self-consuming stove. It takes some little skill in manipulation to direct the draft into and through the stump, but the task can be accomplished with practice and patience. An inlet pipe and portable chimney are used in such a way as to make the fresh air meet the fire and cause it to burn right into the "innards" of the stump, down to the very roots, completely consuming it. I have never seen this method in actual operation, but from all reports, it offers a practical solution of the worst feature of the logged-off land situation, and is being worked with success in the far Western States.



MISSING

This department, conducted in duplicate in WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE and DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, thus giving readers double service, is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable.

If it can be avoided, please do not send us a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

MOORE, CLIFFORD, formerly of the 13th Infantry, Camp Devens, Massachusetts. His home State is Arizona. An old friend is anxious to hear from him and will gratefully appreciate any information as to his present address. R. C., care of this magazine.

HAD and **CAD.**—Tom back here sick with the flu. Thomas Wateman.

BENNETT, RUBY.—She is about tweny-four years old and was last heard of in Shelburn, Indiana. Her cousin would like to hear from her. Mrs. Katie Dougherty, 817½ Jerome Avenue, McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

McISAAC, BERT.—He left his home at Doughertys, Sunbury County, New Brunswick, to go to work in a lumber camp in Quebec, and was never heard from again. That was in 1917. He is eighteen years old, five feet three inches in height, with brown hair and blue eyes. His sister is very anxious to learn what became of him, as she heard that he had died, but this was never verified, and she has been unable to learn anything definite. Any one who can give her information about him will do a great favor by writing to her, and the kindness will be greatly appreciated. Mrs. J. F. Brown, care of this magazine.

FLETCHER.—He was a railroader and left his wife and children in Tacoma, Washington, about twenty years ago. His wife is dead, and his children would like to find their father, whom they have not seen since he went away. Any helpful information will be gratefully received by his daughter, Etta Fletcher, Box 488, Toppenish, Washington.

SIMON, JOHN X.—Have been searching everywhere for you and am awfully worried. Everything is O. K. Write to me in care of this magazine. John Hamilton.

MILES, WALTER.—Baby and I want you to come back at once. We love you and want to see you. There are letters for you. Send me your address and come as soon as you can. Mamma and little Katie, 1412 First Avenue, Dallas, Texas.

CHARLES.—Of course you know we shall always love you just the same. We have no key to the auto-ped house. We both hope you are well and happy. Father and mother.

FITZSIMMONS, ED.—Come home. Your father and mother are not angry with you.

PAULIE.—Please write and let us know where you are. If you come go to daddy or Earl at the mill. If you write to Sky Sky, will get it. Please let us hear from you. Mamma, E. J. W.

EDDIE.—Your lettter was received and was a great relief to mother, who is not well through grieving about you. She does not want to interfere with your happiness, but would like to know where you are so that she can write to you. All is forgiven. Mortie.

BOND, ALFRED.—He came to the United States in 1910 from Bournemouth, England, with his wife Bessie. He left Bridgeport, Connecticut, in March, 1910, for Oklahoma or New Mexico, and has not been heard from since. He had formerly been in South Africa. Any information about him that will help to know what has become of him, or will lead to communication with him, will be duly appreciated and forwarded to his kin in England by George W. Lynch, 1343 Mount Vernon Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

GEPHART, FREDERICK.—Please write to your old shipmate, Owen A. Hardage, B. M. 1-c, Box 7, U. S. S. "Texas," care of Postmaster, San Francisco, California.

L. H.—There is a letter at this office bearing these initials. Please arrange to get it.

ATTENTION.—Members of Headquarters Troop, 5th Division, who were in France during the war, please write to their old buddy, B. E. Eggers, R. R. 1, Kahoka, Missouri.

..CHAPMAN, BENNIE C., who served in the army at McKinley in 1921. Information as to his whereabouts will be greatly appreciated by G. W. Sanders, 414 East Washington Street, Dathan, Alabama.

R. W. B., JR., of Brooklyn, New York, who left his home on March 11th last. Will not interfere with your plans, but must hear from you. Gloom.

GRAHAM, EUGENE, formerly of Nashville, Tennessee. Any one who knows his address, please write to T. T. Wright, 828 Dixie Terminal Building, Cincinnati, Ohio.

LEROUX, ANDREW.—Please send your address to your mother, 445½ North Bixel Street, Los Angeles, California.

NEUHS, FREDERICK.—He was last heard from in Stockton, California, under the name of Temple. He is a carpenter. His son is anxious to hear from him and will greatly appreciate any information that will help to find him. T. A. Neuhs, care of this magazine.

..BOGGS, JAMES STUART, or **JAMES ANDERSON.**—If you see this please write to your old pal Ervin, who has important news for you and would like to hear from you. Ervin O'Connor, care of this magazine.

LITCHFIELD, A. H.—He was last heard from in Savannah, Georgia, about November, 1921. He is asked to write to F. D. Cleek, Tullahoma, Tennessee.

TEVIS, W. H.—His son would be very happy to hear from him, or from any one named Tevis, as he is anxious to find some of his relatives. Roy W. Tevis, R. F. D. 3, Selden, Kansas.

CASE, LEB and **SAM.**—They have not been heard from or seen for over thirty years, when they were in Denison, Texas. They both went to Kentucky to farm. Their sister and other relatives would be glad to hear from them and will appreciate any information about them. It is hoped they will see this and write to their niece, Zelphia Edwards, 300 Second Street, Trenton, Tennessee.

HANNA, DAVID A.—He went away from Cleveland ten years ago and has not been seen since. He is fifty-four years old, about five feet eight or nine inches tall, with dark-blue eyes and had dark-brown bushy hair. His daughter would be very happy if she could hear from him, and will be most grateful for any helpful information. Mrs. Ethel Blain, 2200 East One Hundred and Third Street, Cleveland, Ohio.

ROSE, THEODORE and **CHARLES.**—They left Cleveland, Ohio, eight years ago and have not been heard from since. Their mother is dead and their father is very ill. Any one who knows their whereabouts will do a great favor by writing to their brother Herman, care of this magazine.

WHALER, BETTY, formerly Betty Harris, and **DORA SIMMONS**, who were last seen in Cleveland, Ohio, are asked to write to G. W., care of this magazine.

MEEK, JOSEPH EDWARD.—He was born in Greenville, Kentucky, on November 9, 1866. His parents both died before he was twenty years of age, and the family broke up. His daughter would be glad to hear from any relatives and hopes that some of the Meeks, or any relatives of her father's, will see this and write. Vivan B. Meek, Box 435, East San Diego, California.

ARNETT, J. W.—Please write. Baby is crying for you, and we are very unhappy without you. Let us come to you, or write as soon as you see this. Mamma and Boydie.

BRADLEY, NELLIE.—She is about thirty-seven years of age, was born in County Derry, Ireland, and was last heard of as having gone to Philadelphia. Her husband's name is not known. Her sister is anxious to find her and will be grateful for any helpful information. Mary Bradley, 1907-A Ninth Avenue, Seattle, Washington.

DOBBINS, JACK.—He is about twenty-eight years of age, nearly six feet tall, with dark hair and eyes, and was last heard of in southern California about 1918. It is believed that he was in the army, but nothing certain is known about it. Any information that would help to know where he is would be gratefully appreciated by A. G., care of this magazine.

MONROE, GEORGE.—He was sent from Whittier, California, to the San Pedro Naval Training Station, and joined the navy from there. He was last heard from in Philadelphia. He is asked to write to his sister, Mrs. Mabel Sherman, care of this magazine.

FRED.—Come home. Mother and I are going abroad for about a year, and would like you to accompany us. Plase write. Your sister Mildred.

BRUNER, JOE.—He was last heard of in Mexico last summer. A friend, who knew him when he lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is anxious to get his present address, and will appreciate any information. Billy, care of this magazine.

SMITH, SEDRAL K.—He is about sixteen years old and was last heard from in Oregon in 1921. Any information as to his whereabouts would be gratefully received by his brother, H. M. Smith, 290½ West Twenty-first Street, Portland, Oregon.

GOVERO.—Horace Govero was taken from an orphans' home in St. Louis, Missouri, in December, 1910, and was brought up near Kahoka, that State. He had a married sister whose name he has forgotten, also two brothers named Curtis and Harold. He is now twenty-one years old and would be happy to hear from these relatives. Any helpful information would be gratefully appreciated. Horace Govero, care of this magazine.

HACKMEIER, LOUIS.—He is about thirty-five years of age, served in the navy in 1917, and was disabled. He is a mechanic by trade and was last heard from in February, 1919. His wife and son are very anxious to get news of him and will be deeply grateful for any helpful information. Mrs. L. A. Hackmeier, 433 East Anapamu Street, Santa Barbara, California.

WINFREY, ED.—He left Van Buren in 1920. He has blue eyes, dark-brown hair, and is about five feet five inches in height. Any one who knows of him will do a great favor by writing to his sister, who is very anxious to hear from him. Mrs. Guy Ripley, Box 363, Van Buren, Arkansas.

BRODESSER, LEONA.—In 1916-17 she was sent to Kansas from New York with a group of orphans, and was adopted in Chanute by Mr. and Mrs. Clatfelter. She left them in 1919, and returned to New York. She was of average build with medium brown hair, very curly, and gray eyes. She was of German Jewish descent and had a fine singing voice. About 1920 she married, and lived for a time on Eighty-fifth Street. An old chum of hers in Kansas wants to get in touch with her or her friends, and will appreciate any information. Billie B., care of this magazine.

SIKES, MRS. E. H.—She was last heard of in Nashville, Tennessee. A friend has something for her and asks her to send her address to W. J. Link, Route 1, Box 78, Fountain Head, Tennessee.

PRESTON, MILES S.—Any one who knows his whereabouts will do a great favor by sending his address to J. L. H., 1708½ Broadway Avenue, Mattoon, Illinois.

HARNESCHFEGER, ADAM.—In 1876 there appeared an advertisement for the heirs of this man, who died in Sydney or Melbourne, Australia, and was a wine grower. It is believed that he left a large fortune. Any one who remembers him, or who can give any information about him will do a favor by writing to A. Z., care of this magazine.

CHAPMAN, HARRY.—Have made no attempt to find you, and do not intend to, but am sorry I insisted on the third, as I now feel you did your best. If you wish you can finish the two, and that will be all you need take. If not, write and give address. L. A. C. & S. Co.

GARRETT, HARRY.—He was born in Jamestown, Michigan, the son of Riley and Lucia Garrett, and is about fifty years of age. He had a brother Harley, who died young. After his mother's death he lived with his grandparents until his father took him to Wyoming. Any information will be gratefully received by his cousin, May Garrett French, Middleville, Michigan.

BEANSTRON, FRED.—His daughter has not seen him for ten years, when she was only nine years old, and would be very grateful for any information that would help her to find him. She heard that he was in Chicago a short time ago, and was headed for the West. Any one who knows of him will do a great favor by writing to her. Lillian, care of this magazine.

SCOTT, MILTON CONNORS.—He was last heard from on January 13th of this year in Schenectady, New York. He was taking the course at Albany College of Pharmacy. He is twenty years old, five feet eleven and a half inches tall, with light-brown hair and gray-blue eyes. Any one who knows his whereabouts will do a great favor by writing to his anxious mother, Mrs. Lillian M. Johnson, care of this magazine.

WITHROE, MAUD (PAT), formerly of Charleston, West Virginia, and last heard of in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. An old friend would like to hear from her. Verna, care of this magazine.

HILEMAN, JESSE C., who was last heard of at Lawrence, Massachusetts, **WILLIAM L.,** last heard of at Sapulpa, Oklahoma, and **LLOYD N.,** who was last heard of in Paris Island, South Carolina, in 1915, when he was in the marines. Information that will help to find them will be appreciated by their brother, Ernest L. Hileman, care of this magazine.

PORTER, W. M.—He is between forty and forty-five years of age, of stocky build, square jaw, has dark hair, a deep voice, is bald, and is a blacksmith by trade. He was talking about going to California or Canada. Any one who knows his whereabouts will do a favor by writing to Mrs. A. E., care of this magazine.

NEPHI.—Please let me hear from you somehow. I am heartbroken and cannot understand why you have done this. We all want you home again and will wait for you always. Hazel.

LONG, PATRICK.—When last heard from he was in Dubuque, Iowa, over thirty years ago. His sister is very anxious to know what has become of him and will greatly appreciate any helpful information. Mrs. Kate Long Moran, 15 Bank Street, Stamford, Connecticut.

HENDRICKS, ROBERT B.—He left his home last July and was last heard from in Butte, Montana, in August. He is twenty-two years of age, about five feet nine inches tall, of heavy build, with dark hair, eyes, and complexion. It is thought that he may have gone to Australia. His father and sister wish him to come home without delay. 203 Levine Street, Williamson, West Virginia.

GUS, formerly of Latonia, Kentucky. Why did you leave us that way? I am heartbroken over your actions. Write to me, as several matters of business must be attended to. Dad.

THOMAS, JAMES BOAZ.—He was last heard of at Monroe, Indiana. He has dark-brown eyes and hair. Any one who can give information about him will do a great favor by writing to his mother, who has waited fifteen years for him. Mrs. P. Boaz, 639 East Miami Street, Indianapolis, Indiana.

FALLON, or PHALEN, OWEN.—I was put in an orphans' home in New York City when I was very small, and in 1896 was sent out West and placed in a private home. My father was supposed to be living at that time. If any one can help me to find him the favor will be gratefully appreciated. Mrs. J. R. Mahair, 709 South Sixth Street, Quincy, Illinois.

CARSON, GRACE IRENE.—When last heard from she was in Clinton, Massachusetts, in August, 1922. She is seventeen years old, five feet three inches tall, with brown hair and eyes. Any information concerning her will be greatly appreciated by her chum, Hazel B. C., care of this magazine.

BLUITTE, THOMAS F.—He was last heard of in 1911-12, when he was thinking of going to Vermont. News of him is anxiously desired, and any information that will help to know his whereabouts will be greatly appreciated by Mrs. Charles Orde, 112 Chadwick Street, Bradford, Massachusetts.

SHARPE, CECIL.—He is twenty-six years old, five feet ten inches tall, rather round-shouldered, with dark-brown hair and gray eyes, and wears glasses. He was last heard of in Kamloops, Canada, in November, 1920. He is used to horses and general farm work, and it is thought that he may be in the United States. His mother, who is very ill, is anxious to get news of him and hopes he will see this and write to her without delay. Any helpful information will be gratefully appreciated by his father, A. E. Sharpe, Pritchard, B. C., Canada.

McCLANAHAN, HARRY.—He left home on August 10, 1922, and went to St. Louis, Missouri. He has not been heard from since. He is nineteen years old, stout, with blue eyes and black curly hair, and is deaf. His mother is very anxious about him and would be most grateful for any information as to his whereabouts. She hopes he will see this and drop her a line just to let her know that he is alive and well. Mrs. William McClanahan, Route 7, Box 74, Springfield, Illinois.

MARTIN, FRED WESLEY.—The last heard from him was a letter on February 12, 1919, when he was working at Junction City, Kansas, doing cement work for the Union Pacific Railroad. He said he was going to Colorado, and no news has been received from him since. He is forty-four years old, five feet six inches tall, with light-brown hair and blue eyes. His brother will gratefully appreciate any information that will help to find him. James Martin, 405 Tobin Street, Negaunee, Michigan.

ETHEN, FRANK.—Please come home or write. I will leave the boys with mother and come to you, if you say so. I have faith in you, and hope to hear from you soon. Anne.

DREW, WALTER H.—Until one year ago he was working as a machinist in the Boston navy yard. Any one who knows his whereabouts will do a great kindness by notifying his wife, who is very ill, at 14 Worcester Square, Boston, Massachusetts.

CORRIVEAU, CYPRIEN-ONESIME, sometimes called Pete and sometimes Joe. He left home over three years ago and has been heard from only a few times. His parents are very lonesome for him, and all at home want him to write. His sister Clara is married, and they have only his sister Leona with him. They are getting old and long to see their son once more. Any information that will help to find him will be gratefully received by his sister, Mrs. Ernest St. Pierre, care of this magazine.

BLACK, BERT.—He was last heard of in 1911. He left his home to search for work, leaving his wife and three children. Information as to his whereabouts will be greatly appreciated by his daughter, Mary Louise Black, 322 Scott Street, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

BAKER, JACK.—He is sixteen years old and was last seen in Walla Walla, Washington. Any information about this boy will be thankfully received by his mother, Mrs. Eva Baker, Pendleton, Oregon.

HITCHCOCK, WILLIAM.—Any one who knows him will do a favor by asking him to write to his niece, Mrs. Flora Zenour, 512 Lincoln Street, Rochester, Pennsylvania.

BANTA, WILLIAM.—I am his brother John's eldest daughter, and I have been trying to get in touch with him for some time without success. I hope he will see this and write to me. If any of his relatives who live near Bend or Princeville can give information that will help to find him they will do a great kindness by writing to me. Mrs. Sharlet Banta Knight, care of this magazine.

CHURCH, WILLIAM H.—When last heard of he was on a ship in the service of the United Marine Corporation, in 1921. Any one who knows where he is now will do a favor by writing to Albert G. Kombacher, R. F. D. 2, Morrisville, New York.

WEBB, GLENNA, who was last heard of in Sharon, Pennsylvania, is asked to write to an old friend, who is anxious to hear from her. L. J. B., care of this magazine.

KLEIN, CHARLES E.—He is a nephew of L. O. and B. O. Allen, of Kansas City, and when last heard of was working in their garage in 1922. An old friend would gladly receive any information that would help to find him. D. M. L., care of this magazine.

FORMER BUDDIES of Company C, 313 M. G. B., 80th Division, are asked to write to John J. Vincent, Kingmont, Marion County, West Virginia.

UNKENHOLTZ, HARRY, former S. S. U. ambulance driver with the French army, 1918-1919, is asked to write to Cyril Newman, care of this magazine.

ANDERSON, PETER C. and **MARTIN.**—They were born in Denmark between 1870-80, and came to America with their father, C. C. Anderson, between then and 1895. They were last heard of at Platte Center, Nebraska, about 1901. There is important news for them and any information as to their whereabouts will be greatly appreciated by George Anderson, Company C, 2d Engineers, Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

CATHEY, PRIVATE HENRY CLAY, 140th Casual Company. Any one who knows his address please write to his old buddy of Blois, France, 1919. Frank H. Robarge, 3532 Hudson Boulevard, Jersey City, New Jersey.

LYTTON, ACHILLE.—Please write to us at once in care of this magazine. Mother grieves constantly. Your sister Catherine.

THOMAS, FINIS D.—I have tried very hard to find you. Our father and my husband are both in bad health. No matter what has happened I love you, so please write. Your sister Eula, Box 68, Binghamton Branch, Memphis, Tennessee.

SCRIBNER, WILLIAM H.—He is twenty-eight years old, five feet eight inches tall, with brown eyes and dark complexion. He was last heard of at Camp Logan and was discharged on January 4, 1919. Any information as to his whereabouts will be greatly appreciated by his sister Minnie, in care of this magazine.

KELLY, WILLIAM R.—He left his home in Redwood County, Minnesota, in 1901, and was seen once since that time at Jamestown, North Dakota. Any information that would help to know his whereabouts will be very much appreciated by his father, Martin Kelly, 540 Third Avenue South, Glasgow, Montana.

ROONEY, THOMAS.—He left Providence, Rhode Island, forty or forty-five years ago. He was well known there by old-timers as a patron of boxing, was a clever horseman, and an all-around sportsman. He was last seen eighteen years ago out in the West, where it was said he had an inn. When he first went away he stayed for a time in Chicago, and was heard from several times, but after the death of his father, Matthew Rooney, he wrote that he was going farther West, and no more letters came from him. His sister Theresa, who is getting along in years, is all alone in the world, her husband having died lately, and it would make her very happy if she could hear from her brother. If any one who has ever known him out West will write to her she will be very grateful for the kindness. Mrs. Theresa Holden, care of this magazine.

STEWART, CHARLEY, also known as Charley Post, last heard of in San Antonio, Texas, please write to your pal, E. M. L., care of this magazine.

INFORMATION WANTED of the whereabouts of my sister, Mrs. Myrtle Lahe, and my father, **T. H. HARTMAN,** will be greatly appreciated. Mrs. Maude Lee, Miranda City, Texas.

SNYDER, HARRY.—When last heard from he was serving on the U. S. S. "North Dakota." He is about five feet seven inches tall, with light hair, has one front tooth missing, and speaks with an accent. He is asked to write to his old shipmate, Jack A. Keehn, 69 Jacob Street, Newark, New Jersey.

STANLEY, BRUCE.—He is an auto mechanic, and was last heard of in 1921, when he was going from Camp Grant, Illinois, to Milwaukee. He is five feet eight inches tall, with black hair, brown eyes, and fair complexion. Any news of him will be gratefully received by his mother, who is very anxious to hear from him. Mrs. D. T. Stanley, Dalworth Park, Texas.

ATTENTION.—Any one who knows the parentage of a little girl who was with Samuel H. and Annie Conroy, of Cambridge Street, Boston, Massachusetts, twenty-five years ago will do a great favor by writing to Mrs. Agnes Best, Box 72, Avon, Massachusetts.

VAILES, HILLARD.—He is nearly six feet tall and was last heard of in Cass, West Virginia. Any one who knows where he is will do a favor by writing to Mrs. J. R. Warrix, Buckhannon, West Virginia.

CROFT, FRANCIS L.—He served in the navy and was last heard from at San Francisco when he came from Honolulu on the U. S. S. "Baltimore," in October, 1922. An old friend would like to hear from him. C. Coles, Route 2, Rigby, Idaho.

F. E. V. A.—Write me as soon as you see this. I have important information for you. Give address where I can reach you by return mail. Dad, same old address. F. H. V.

FINCH, HARRY.—He was last seen in Englewood, Illinois, May 8, 1922, wearing a University of California bronze belt buckle, which he prized highly. He is eighteen years old, slim, with light hair, freckles, and blue eyes. Information as to his present address will be appreciated by Arthur P. Coe, 32 Live Oak Avenue, Daytona, Florida.

BAYMILLER, KENNETH S.—He was last heard of at Fort Mills, Philippine Islands, in the summer of 1920. His home was in Quincy, Illinois. He is asked to write to an old army pal, Guy M. Cromer, 42 Harris Street, Orrville, Anderson County, South Carolina.

BURKE, JACK.—Remember the Pullman car incident at Yuma, Arizona? I still make good things out of leather cuffs. Send your address to me in care of this magazine. Blackie.

ATTENTION.—Any member of the 60th C. A. C. Headquarters Band is asked to write to an old buddy who is anxious to hear from them. Frank Farrell please send his address. Frederick Wolfe, East Haddam, Connecticut.

CLINCH, JOSEPH PRESTON.—He is thirty-three years old, about five feet seven inches tall, and left his home in Glasgow, Missouri, in September, 1909. His mother is anxious to hear from him and will gratefully appreciate any helpful information. Mrs. P. S. Clinch, Vinita, Oklahoma.

SWIFT, MRS. FRANCES, whose maiden name was Hunton. Her husband's name is William C. Swift, and she has a daughter named Mildred. Also **FRANK D. WARREN,** formerly of Nappanee, Indiana, brother-in-law to the above. Any information about these persons will be greatly appreciated by Mrs. Olive Hunton, care of this magazine.

EASTMAN, ALBERT GOODHUE.—He left Boston about 1902, and was seen in Washington, D. C., in 1917. He was an architect. His daughter, who has not seen him for eighteen years, is sure that he would be happy to see her and her little children, and hopes he will write to her soon. She will be most grateful for any information that will help to find her father. Mrs. Margery Eastman Greenleaf, 34 Aldermount Avenue, Braintree, Massachusetts.

CAMPBELL, CARRIE.—She was last heard of in Danville, Illinois, in 1902, where she lived a great part of her younger life. She would be now about thirty-five years of age, brunette, about five feet five inches tall. An old friend would like to hear from her. E. E. H., care of this magazine.

WALSH, RUSSELL E.—He was last heard of in Livingston, Texas, four years ago. He is tall and slender, with blue eyes, light hair, and fair complexion. He was often known as "Slim." He was injured in train service near Little Rock, and it is feared that he may have died. His aged mother is very anxious to get information about him, as she is left alone trying to care for herself. He was married and had one daughter, now eight years old. His wife has married again, and the child has been given to her mother's people. Any information that would help to know what became of this young man would be gratefully appreciated by his mother, Mrs. F. Walsh, care of this magazine.

LEE, MERRITT.—He is about fifty-eight years old, and his last known address was in Dorchester, Nebraska, about 1885, where he lived with his father. His parents were Charles and Julia Lee. He had a sister, Minnie, and a brother, Fred. Information will be gratefully appreciated by Elmer W. Lee, Box 73, Winslow, Washington.

GATES, PHILIP.—Please write to me in care of this magazine. Everything is all right. M. C.

KAVANAUGH, PATSY, who was discharged from Company L, 5th Infantry, in 1904, and left Plattsburg, New York, for St. Louis, Missouri. Also **WILLIAM JONES,** who transferred from Company F, 7th Infantry, to Hospital Corps, at Fort William McKinley, Philippine Islands, in 1910, are asked to write to their old bunkie, Butts, care of this magazine.

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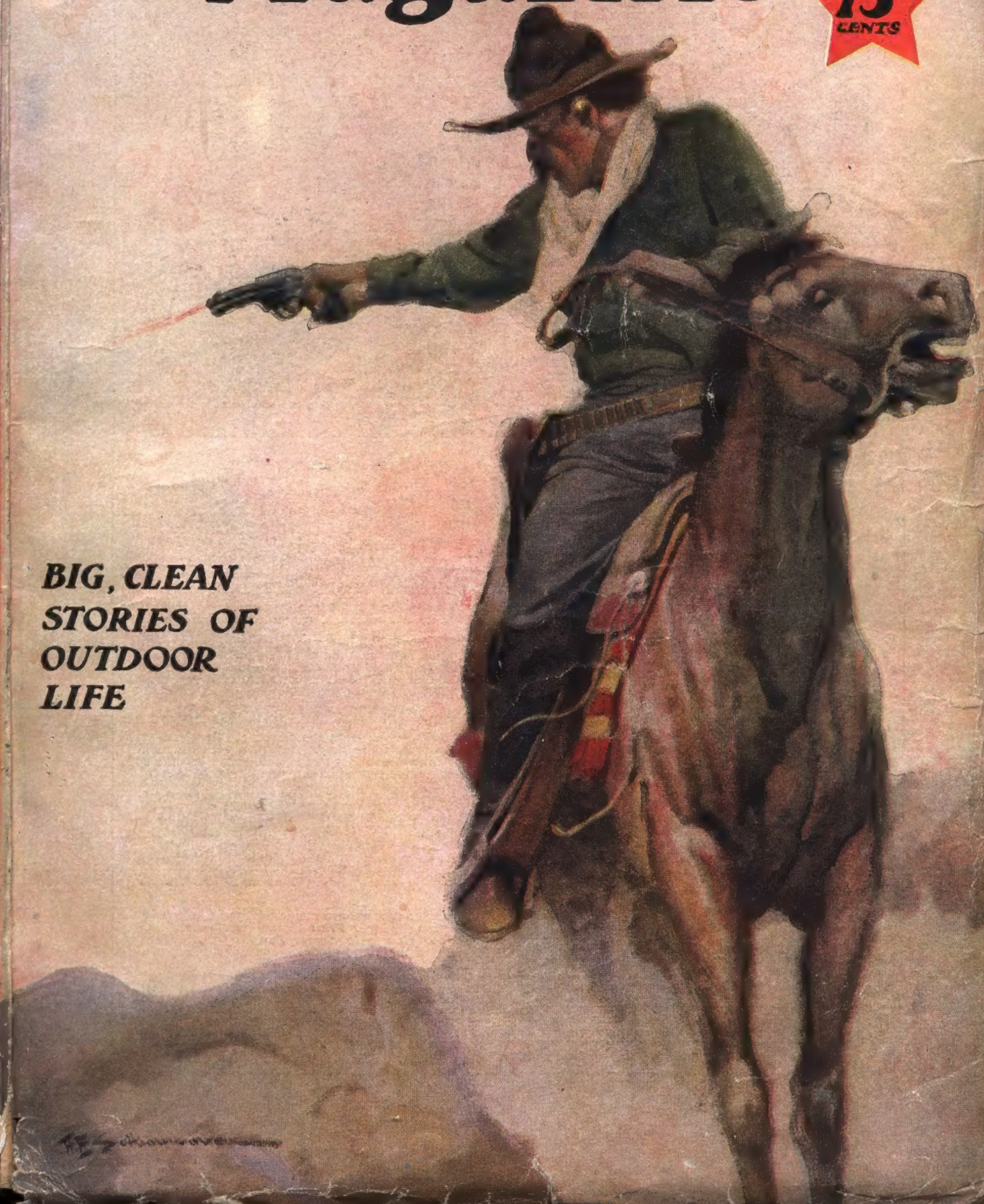

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